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DICK TALBOT'S CLEAN OUT



BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

IT WAS THE VETERAN, JOE BOWERS. "HYER I AM, THE SLICKEST MAZEPPA THAT EVER DID THE BAREBACK ACT!" HE CRIED.

Dick Talbot's Clean-Out;

OR,

THE COHORT OF FIVE.

The Romance of a Just Vengeance.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROB," "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE WILDERNESS.

It was a lonely spot, in a wild and mountainous country which gave plain evidence that at some remote period an earthquake had made mischief with the face of nature.

Junction Flat the settlement was named, and at present it could only boast of two houses.

A more unpromising spot for a town could hardly be found in all the wilds of the West.

There was a reason for its existence, though.

It was at the crossing of three roads; three stage-lines met at this point, and from this fact it derived its name.

First there was the line from Carrizalillo Springs to Tombstone, then that from the mining-camps situated in the northern foothills of the Sierra Madre range—Mother Mountains—to Paso del Norte, and a small hack-line which in connection with the other two, ran from Junction Flat to the newly-discovered "diggings" in the rude and broken country at the southern end of the Chi-ri-ca-hua range.

As we have said, there were but two houses in the place.

First, the stage-house with its stable and corral; second, a rude cabin situated by the little stream which flowed through the "Flat."

Three inhabitants only could the settlement boast—John Cavillo, a brawny, mongrel American-Mexican, who had charge of the stock, Michael Vernado, a full-blooded Mexican, who assisted him, and the latter's daughter, Manuelita, a rather good-looking Mexican girl although her sharp features and flashing eyes, showing that she had a temper of her own, rather detracted from her personal appearance.

When the stage-coaches were on time, three of them met at Junction Flat, namely, the west-bound coach from El Paso, the east-bound on the same line, and the up stage from the Sierra Madre region.

And after these coaches had discharged the passengers bound for the new mining-district, the hack started for Apache City, the chief settlement of the Chi-ri-ca-hua region.

The coaches were due at three in the afternoon, and as it was only some twenty miles to Apache City the hack usually arrived there early in the evening.

On this day of which we write all the coaches were late. That from the East was an hour behind and only had a single passenger for the North, a short, thick-set German, middle-aged, with long, yellow hair and a bushy blonde beard.

Being apparently in a great hurry to push onward, he seemed disappointed when told that the hack would not start for the North until the other two stages arrived.

"Sapperment!" he exclaimed, with a strong German accent, "I am in mooch hurry! I hafe to waste no time, dunder and blixen!"

"Well, sw'aring won't help you any," Cavillo observed. "Go in and make yourself comfortable; the others will be right along, I reckon."

The German surveyed the speaker for a moment with his small blue eyes, which were almost as round as beads, and yet seemed wonderfully sharp, then nodded his head and said:

"Dot's so! I vill go me the house in and wait!"

When he had disappeared the Mexican, Vernado, who was an evil-looking fellow, lounged over to Cavillo and observed:

"The Dutchman looks as if he would be worth the picking."

"Yes, we will see what the other coaches bring, perhaps we will be able to do some work."

Soon to the ears of the men came the noise of the wheels of the Western stage.

This, too, had but a single passenger, a well-dressed, middle-aged man, with iron gray hair and "mutton-chop" whiskers a portly man with a "well-fed" look, who evidently was on good terms with the world.

He, too, was anxious to push on to Apache City as soon as possible.

"Bless my soul! is it possible that I will have to wait!" he exclaimed. And from this accent, as well as his appearance, a judge of men would have set him down as an Englishman.

The same explanation was made to him as to the other, but he did not care to go in the house, preferring to sit outside.

He had a book to read and was soon deep in it.

"This fellow looks to be as good a pigeon as the other," Vernado observed, to Cavillo.

"Yes, yes," responded Vernado. "I think we

will do a good stroke of business to-night if the other stage don't bring in somebody to interfere with our game."

"Not likely!"

"That is so, for there are never many passengers from the lower camps bound for the Chi-ri-ca-hua settlements."

"Here she comes!"

The quick ears of the man had not deceived him. The third coach was approaching, and soon made its appearance.

As Cavillo had predicted the coach had few passengers, and only one of them was bound for the upper mines.

But this one was a gentleman whose appearance did not at all please the two rogues, as their earnest confession demonstrated.

"Well, I don't like the looks of that fellow at all!" Cavillo exclaimed.

"He's a sport," the other remarked, "and all these sports are generally well-heeled."

"Yes, that is the trouble with them; they are as well-heeled with weapons as money."

"Few travelers in this region who are not armed," replied the Mexican.

This new-comer was a well-built man of thirty-five or thereabouts. He was neatly dressed in a dark suit, wearing no vest though, possibly the better to display the elaborately frilled shirt which covered his broad chest.

Around his waist a leather belt was bound, and although the natural supposition was that this supported holsters in which revolvers were carried, yet if the "tools" were there, the skirts of the coat hid them from view.

The coach being behind time, it only stopped at Junction Flat long enough to allow the passengers to alight and then went on its way.

The new-comer was in "light marching order," being without baggage.

He cast an inquiring glance around after the coach started, and perceiving Cavillo and Vernado standing by the corral, approached them.

"How about this hack for Apache City?" he inquired.

"It is late," Cavillo replied. "It ought to have been here fully three hours ago."

"I thought it connected with this stage for Tombstone?"

"Well, it is supposed to do so, but it does not always make it—that is, on time. The Tombstone stage is generally late, though, so the connection is usually made. I reckon there ain't any down-passengers to-day, and that is the reason why the hack hasn't got in. You see there is not much travel this way, nearly everybody goes out by the north."

"She just comes to this point, then turns around and goes back?" the stranger questioned.

"Yes, that's the programme. She will be along pretty soon."

"Is this gentleman bound for Apache City?" and the sport nodded toward the Englishman, busy with his book.

"Yes, and there's a Dutchman inside the house."

During this conversation the two men had been eying each other intently.

"It seems to me that I have seen you somewhere?" exclaimed John Cavillo, abruptly.

"Yes, I shouldn't be surprised—I have been there often," the other replied.

"Been where?" asked Cavillo, puzzled.

"The place you mentioned, somewhere."

"Oh," and a scowl appeared in the swarthy face of the stage-agent. "Now you are making game of me!"

"Not at all; only a little harmless joke of mine."

"But haven't I met you?"

"Well, if you have you have decidedly the advantage of me."

"How may I call your handle?"

"Well, you might call it John Smith, but it isn't."

Again the man of the mixed races scowled.

"I was only asking a civil question," he remarked, in a sulky way.

"Of course, no harm in it at all. Don't mind my little pleasantry—it is a way I have sometimes," the stranger observed, good-naturedly.

"I have not the least objection to telling you my name. I am called Richard Velvet."

Cavillo shook his head.

"I reckon you ain't the party I thought you was, for that isn't the name."

"Well, it is the best I have at present."

"You are a sport, I reckon?"

"Oh, no, don't be deceived by the style of my dress; that is only a whim of mine. I am manager of a mine down to the south'ard here," and then the speaker turned away and sauntered up to the Englishman.

"That is a lie!" Cavillo exclaimed to the Mexican. "I knew him in California. He is a red-hot sport and as dangerous as a panther when roused. He was called Cherokee then."

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE STORY.

As the stranger walked toward the Englishman, the German came out of the house and perceiving the others came forward.

"Excuse me, sir," said Velvet to the Englishman; "are you going to Apache City?"

"Yes, sir," responded the other, closing his

book and taking a look at the questioner; then, apparently being quite favorably impressed, he asked:

"Are you also going that way?"

"Yes, sir."

At this point the German came up.

"Gentlemen, vill dot stage-coach not come mid dis vay at all?" he exclaimed, impatiently.

"Oh, yes, it will get along soon, I reckon, from what the agent says," Velvet replied. "We must wait and possess our souls with patience."

"Batiencie, mine gootness!" exclaimed the German. "As mooch as dree hours ago dey say bretty soon—bretty soon dot coach vill come!"

And the German took a seat upon the log upon which the Englishman sat.

"Really, of course, the men don't know any more about the matter than we do," Velvet observed, also taking a seat upon the log. "They know that the hack is late as we do, but why she is late or when she will get here, they cannot tell."

"They are a couple of hangdog-looking fellows," the Briton observed.

"Yes, neither one will ever be hung for his beauty," Velvet remarked.

"Sapperment—nein!" cried the German. "Dot faces are enough dot milk-pan to turn sour!"

"By the way, are you a traveler in these Western wilds, like myself, or a resident?" asked the Englishman, with a curious glance at the dress of the other. "No offense in the question, I hope?" he hastened to add.

"None in the world," Richard Velvet replied.

"I am a resident and have been for quite a number of years, but not in this particular part of the country, where I am a new-comer, comparatively speaking. I have been speculating for years, and am now on my way to Apache City to see if there is any money in this new district of which Apache City is the center."

"Ah, yes, I see. Well, I am going to that place myself, but with no idea of speculating in mines, or engaging in any business, in fact."

With this declaration the Englishman paused abruptly and cast an inquiring glance at Velvet, and this gentleman guessed that there was something else the Briton wished to say, but did not know exactly how to get at it.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," the Briton continued in an extremely polite way, "but I hope you will not be offended if I remark that your costume is radically different from that usually worn by the inhabitants of these wild regions."

"No offense at all, for I am aware that I do not dress like the rest, but my idea is that there isn't any reason why a man should not dress as well here as in the East, providing he has the wherewithal to afford the luxury."

"Yes, of course; no reason in the world, but—you will not be offended, I hope, if I speak the thoughts which are in my mind."

"Oh, no; you are a gentleman, sir, and a polished and educated one, if I am any judge, and I should imagine from the fashion of your speech an Englishman."

"I am," responded the other. "My name is Reginald Broughton, of Newcastle-on-Tyne."

"And mine is Richard Velvet, at your service. Go ahead! Speak freely; I am not at all thin-skinned, and it is not likely that your questions will offend me in any way."

"Well, what I was about to remark was that the fashion of your dress is odd, and I have been informed that men who are costumed as you are can generally be set down for—and the speaker hesitated as if at a loss for a word.

"For sports—gamblers, to use the plain, old-fashioned title. Don't be afraid to speak right out. Your informants were correct; when you meet a man in this region who is careful about his personal appearance and wears a 'billed, frilled shirt, in setting him down for a man who depends upon his wits for a living you will be correct ninety-nine times out of a hundred. But at present I would be the hundredth man, for I am engaged in mining business, and only play cards now for amusement—in fact, rarely play at all, for after being busy all day in attending to my business, when night comes I prefer to stay home to having a time with the boys around town."

"Of course, quite natural."

"I will not deny, though, that I have been a sport of the sports, and, through the force of long association, I still wear the frilled shirt of the gambler."

"Yes, yes, I see. Well, Mr. Velvet, it was not out of idle curiosity that I spoke in regard to your dress. I am in this wilderness upon an important bit of business, and I thought that if you were a sport you might be able to afford me some information."

Here the Englishman paused and cast a glance at the German as though doubtful whether to continue.

The German had listened to the conversation and guessed the meaning of the glance.

"Gentlemen, I am not dot kind of a man to listen to words dot do not me concern; if der matter is brivate I vill go away mit mineself, but if der matter is not too brivate, I vill hear mit both ears, and no say to nobody ein word,

for I hafe bis'ness to talk mit der gentlemen, too," and he nodded to Velvet.

"Here my card ish."

"Sebastian Poppenheim!" read the Englishman aloud.

"Good gracious!" he cried, "is it possible? Are you Professor Poppenheim of Heidelberg?" exclaimed Broughton jumping to his feet.

"Yes, yes, dot is me!" replied the German, also rising.

"Why, my nephew, Robert Derwentwater, was under your care for three years, and he always declared you treated him like a father."

"Mine gootness, how small der world ish after all!" And the two men shook hands warmly.

"Yes, true enough, for though I never met you, Herr Professor, yet I have heard so much about you from my nephew that you seem like an old friend."

"Dot ish true."

The two men resumed their seats.

"I can go on now without fear," Broughton remarked, "for I know that the Herr Professor is discretion itself. Now, although my business does not require that there shall be any mystery about it, yet I do not care to go about proclaiming it from the house-tops."

The others nodded.

"It is a family matter—an old story too, that the world has heard many and many a time," the Briton remarked, gravely.

"Some thirty years ago my elder brother came to America. He was a wild youth—had got into all sorts of scrapes at home, and was really compelled to go abroad to avoid unpleasant consequences in England. In time he drifted to California, became infatuated with a beautiful girl and married her. The union was not a happy one, for my brother, although not really a bad fellow was an extremely flighty one, and marriage did not reform him in the least."

"It seldom does," Velvet remarked, dryly.

"The wife, although only a poor girl was a proud-spirited one, and she would not submit to be neglected."

"Dot womans was in der right," the German observed.

"At last an open rupture came. My brother had not told his wife who he really was, for after coming to this country he went by his middle name, but on this particular occasion, when she upbraided him for his conduct, being inflamed with liquor, his prudence forsook him and he told his wife who he was, adding that in the course of time he would bear one of the proudest titles in England."

"The young wife had a spirit of her own, and she retorted that he was acting more like a low-lived vagabond than a scion of the English nobility."

"One word led to another, and the upshot was that my brother acted in the most reprehensible manner—I am not attempting to defend his conduct in the least—he acted like a rascal. Without a word of warning he fled from his young wife and made his way back to England. His income was a liberal one, so he was able to do about as he pleased, and under the circumstances he ought to have made some provision for the wife he deserted, and for the child, which in the due course of time came into the world."

"Well, I have heard of such cases," Velvet observed. "A well-educated, well-born man can be as great a rascal once in a while as the meanest wretch that was ever born and cradled in the gutter."

"It was so in this case decidedly. When the child was born—a girl—the wife wrote to England, and though the address was faulty, thanks to our excellent post-office department, it reached the man for whom it was intended."

"All that letter contained was a notice of the birth of the child, the information that both the mother and babe were well, her address, and a sarcastic sentence to the effect that she hopes that in time the scion of nobility would be honest enough to do justice to his wife and child."

"A proud-spirited woman!" Velvet observed.

"Yes: no notice was taken of the letter. Ten years passed. My brother became infatuated with a beautiful girl, an heiress with a princely fortune; by this time his extravagance had seriously impaired his own estate, and a wealthy marriage was extremely desirable. For ten years he had had no word from California. He had been married there by a magistrate, and in one of the English newspapers he had read an account of the violent death of this man in an election riot in San Francisco. He reasoned that if his wife was alive, the fact that he had married her under an assumed name and that the official who performed the ceremony was dead, would prevent her from proving her marriage, so he wedded the heiress."

"Near twenty years more passed away: wealth and honor came thick upon my brother; but the angel of vengeance was on his track."

"He had children, ten altogether, strong and hearty apparently, but nonelived; then his wife died."

"Now, an old man, with an incurable heart

disease which may send him to his long home at any minute, he repents the crime of his youth and desires to do justice to the woman and child whom he so fearfully wronged."

"A late repentance, but better late than never," Velvet remarked.

"As the representative of my brother, I came to find the wife and child, the latter now a full-grown woman, of course. In San Francisco I easily procured the information I desired."

"The wife, being skillful with her needle, had set up a dressmaking establishment, and prospered so well that she was able to give her daughter a splendid education, she being reared at a convent school, renowned for its training."

"When the daughter was fifteen her mother died, leaving a snug little fortune to her child, and the girl was to be kept at the school until she was eighteen, so as to complete her education. She fell a prey though to the wiles of an adventurer, and a year after her mother's death fled from the convent with him."

"This man was a gambler named William Peters, but bearing the nick-name of Curly Bill, on account of his hair, jet-black, which curled in ringlets all over his head."

"I have met the man," Velvet remarked.

"I came across him at Albuquerque some three years ago. He was a singularly handsome fellow, although a thorough-paced scoundrel, but just the man to catch a young girl's fancy. I think, though, that the man is dead, for it strikes me that I heard of his being killed in a difficulty."

"Did he have a wife with him?" asked the Briton, eagerly.

"I think not, though I might not have heard of it; still I think I would, though, particularly if she was a good-looking, attractive woman."

"And such is the woman I seek, if age has not belied the promise of her youth," Broughton observed. "She was dark-eyed and dark-haired, tall in stature and well-proportioned, finely-educated and gifted in almost every way. I have not been able to procure a picture of her, but there is one in existence, which I am to have as soon as it can be hunted up."

"And you are going to Apache City with the hope of finding Curly Bill there?" Velvet asked.

"Yes, I received information at Tombstone that such a man was there about a month ago, and had started for these new mines up in the Chi-ri-ca-hua district."

"Accompanied by the woman?"

"Well, I cannot say, for on that point I was not able to gain any information."

"I am afraid that you will not be successful in finding the lady with Curly Bill, even if you discover him. Such fellows as he rarely burden themselves with one particular girl for any length of time. What is the girl's name?"

"Eleanor, and the maiden name of the mother was Marguerite Clausen."

"Well, I will do what I can for you."

"So vill I!" the German exclaimed.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

THE Englishman expressed his thanks to the two, and then the professor looked about him in a mysterious manner, then put his finger to his lips and said:

"To me listen, mine friends. I hafe mooch bis'ness in this country. I seek a valley two miles long, one-half mile wide, mit a leetle stream through it, right on der boundary line between New Mexico and Arizona, forty miles north of the Mexican boundary line. I will know the valley when I to it come by der big white stones—big as houses, dot are in der middle of it. In ein spot there are dree, dot look as if some giants beoples had been blaying jack-stones mit them."

"I will bet a hat that some fellow has been telling you some big ghost stories about this valley that you speak of!" Velvet exclaimed, with a laugh.

"Oh, no, in der valley some rare plants grow; I am der naturalist, mine friend."

"Ah, yes, I see, but the rarest plant of all, and that most commonly sought after is the one which shows you the 'color' at its roots when you pull it up!" Velvet remarked.

"Der color?" asked the professor.

"Yes, the tiny grains of gold which show that the precious metal is plentiful in the soil."

"Ah, yesh, yesh, dot kind of blant I would not mind finding mineself."

The conversation at this point was interrupted by the arrival of the hack.

It was without passengers, the only man with the outfit being the driver, a tall, lean, ugly-looking fellow who bore the name of Hungry Jake, and if ever a man looked the appellation the stage-driver certainly did, for he had a gaunt and hungry look as though he had not had a "square" meal for days, and was longing for a chance to get at one.

The Englishman and the German professor made haste to get their valises and clambered into the hack, while Velvet mounted to a seat on the box beside the driver.

"You pilgrims needn't be in sich a durned

hurry to take possession of the hearse," the driver exclaimed. "We ain't going to start right away. The hosses nev got to be changed, 'cos one of my beasts is so lame that he ain't good for anything, and then, too, I'm going to git something to eat, 'cos I ain't going to starve myself to death if youse fellers never git to 'Pache City."

"All right, old man, we are in no hurry!" Velvet exclaimed. "Take all the time you like; we have the whole night before us."

At th's point a steed and rider made their appearance on the scene, and the aspect they presented was so odd that all eyes were instantly riveted upon them.

The steed was a mule, a medium-sized beast, dirty white in color and presenting all the appearances of having had a hard time of it for a number of years.

Upon the mule, seated with his face to the tail, riding upon the animal's bare back, no saddle, was a fat fellow, clad in about as wretched garments as any tramp ever boasted.

From his high-crowned, almost shapeless old hat to the really remarkable patched boots upon his feet, his costume was truly unique, and if there had been a prize offered for the king of bummers, this greasy, fat fellow would surely have taken it in the face of strong competition.

"Wa-al, w'ot in thunder is that?" cried the driver, in astonishment.

The exclamation, reaching the ears of the passengers within the hack, caused the Englishman to stick his head out of one window while the German professor protruded his from the other.

"It looks like a man on a mule to me," Velvet observed, and he fancied he recognized the new-comer the moment he appeared, although he could not see his face.

At first it was a mystery to the observers how the man could possibly keep on the animal, being seated in such an awkward way, for the mule was advancing at a brisk pace, causing the rider to bob up and down in an extremely ridiculous manner; but soon they discovered that the rider was tied on the animal with strong cords in such a way that he could not possibly either fall or get off.

When the mule came within fifty feet of the coach, he stuck his nose up in the air and gave vent to a vociferous "Hee-haw!" as though begging to be relieved from the strange burden that clung so tightly to his back.

The rider, turning his head and casting a glance over his shoulder, revealed the face of a man who is no stranger to the readers who have followed the fortunes of Injun Dick Talbot through the various stories which relate his adventures.

It was the veteran bummer, the famous, irrepressible vagabond, Joe Bowers.

"Hyer I am, the slickest Mazeppa that ever did the bareback act!" the veteran bummer cried.

The mule cantered up to the side of the stage-coach and then came to a halt so abruptly that any ordinary rider would have been apt to take a flying leap over his head, but although the fat fellow got a jolt which made him howl, the lashings kept him in his place.

"W'ot are you 'bout, you beastly beast?" cried the veteran, in a rage. "Do you want to bump all the insides out of me?"

Velvet was the first to come to the rescue, for the others were indulging in uproarious laughter at the comical sight.

Velvet leaped down from the box of the stage, drew an eight-inch bowie-knife from underneath the skirt of his coat and approached the new-comer, remarking as he did so:

"Well, stranger, though I don't know you from a side of sole-leather, hang me if I ain't going to help you out of this difficulty!"

Bowers gave a slight start of surprise as the voice fell upon his ears, dug his heels into the sides of the mule in a vicious manner, which action caused the beast to frisk around so that the rider could get a view of his rescuer.

"Hello! 'pears to me that somewhar in the dim vista of the past I hev run across a man 'bout your size."

"Shouldn't be surprised, for I have been in a heap of places during the past ten or twenty years; my name is Velvet—Richard Velvet," the other replied, as he proceeded to cut the strong cords which bound the bummer to the mule.

"Oh, yes; I reckoned I knew you!" Joe Bowers exclaimed. "I remember now: I ran across you in Grass Valley jest about ten years ago. You ought to remember me, 'cos I was running the town jest at that time."

"Yes; I reckon I was there somewhere about that period."

A few slashes of the bowie-knife and the bummer was freed from the bonds which bound him.

With a deep sigh of relief he dismounted.

"Well, now, you kin jest bet all the ducats you have got, or ever expect to git, that I am mighty glad to git onto terra firma ag'in!" Joe Bowers exclaimed.

"How did you happen to get into such a fix?" Velvet asked.

"Do you know a mining-camp named Beaver Flat?"

"I do."

"Well, me noble dook, you kin jest bet the biggest slug you ever saw that it is the toughest place this side of Old Nick's quarters!" the bummer declared, with great emphasis.

"I went inter that 'ar camp as a kind of missionary for to teach the boys a few p'int on poker and sich games, and would you believe it, the or'nery cusses didn't appreciate me?"

"Is that so?"

"Sure as ye'r born," the veteran answered. "Yes, sir-ee, they sed I was a fraud of the furst water, accused me of cheating—swore I had aces up my sleeves and kings in my boots, jest 'cos I was lueky enuff to clean 'em out, and the miserable galoots waded into me like a thousand of bricks—took all my wealth away, and then tied me on the back of this mule and h'isted me forth to the cold mercies of an unfeeling world. Some of the cusses had seen the play of Mazeppa at the theater, and they thought it was the biggest kind of a joke to make me do the bareback act, although I told them that I wasn't no circus-rider."

"You have had a lucky escape," Velvet remarked.

"Oh, yes; I got off by the skin of my teeth, but the old original Joe Bowers generally manages to pull through," he observed, with a grin.

"The galoots thought they had got all my wealth, too, but I was fly enuff to save a trifle, so I ain't quite down to the bed-rock yet."

"Well, that is fortunate, for this is a mighty bad country to be strapped in," Velvet observed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PLOTTERS.

WHILE the sport had been engaged in releasing the bummer from his bonds, the German and Englishman attentively watching the operation, the driver had dismounted from his seat and held a conference with Cavillo and the Mexican.

The three were a good hundred feet from the coach, so they were able to speak freely without danger of being overheard by the passengers, and for that matter the others were too busy with the bummer to pay any attention to them.

"Hungry, have you got onto those two pilgrims and the plunder they carry?" Cavillo asked.

"Oh, yes, they look as if they were well-heeled," the driver replied with a glance at the stage-coach and its inmates.

"I reckon they are for a fact. They are the kind of men who never travel without plenty of money. You kin see that at a glance."

"Yes, they kinder look like speculators," the driver remarked.

"Of course; they have heard that these new mines are panning out well and they are going to pick up some of the wealth. They are no miners, you know, any one can see that who has got sense."

"Oh, yes, thar's no mistake 'bout it. These pilgrims are the kind of galoots that fatten on the miners, and in the long run they are the men who collar the money," Hungry Jake observed with the air of a philosopher.

"And that cuss talking with the fellow on the mule is another one of the same sort—that is, a man who gits the dust without having to work for a living—a sharp who flips the pasteboards for a living, and if thar is any men in this world whom I hate it is these sports with their boiled shirts and store clothes."

"John and I have been putting our heads together in regard to these pilgrims," the Mexican remarked, "and we have come to the conclusion that they are pigeons who will be worth picking."

"Yes, yes, I reckon so," Hungry Jake observed with a nod of satisfaction. "I shouldn't be surprised if they would pan out a thousand apiece at the least and, mebbe, more."

"That is what John and I reckoned, and we came to the conclusion that there was a big chance to do a big stroke of business."

"How about the sport?" asked the stage-driver, abruptly. "Don't you think he will be apt to be well heeled too?"

"Yes, undoubtedly, but the trouble with him is that he is probably as well heeled with weapons as with money, and will not be apt to give up his plunder without a fight, while the others are tenderfeet who can be easily plucked."

Hungry Jake had been taking the measure of the sport with his eyes while the Mexican was speaking, and a contemptuous expression appeared on his face.

"See hyer, it 'pears to me that you galoots are too durned anxious to allers git onto a soft thing!" he exclaimed. "This sport seems to be a good man enuff—a pretty fair chief as men go, but I reckon I wouldn't make more than a mouthful of him if I should go in for to chaw him up!" And the driver doubled up his bony fist and held up his muscular arm to give due effect to his words as he spoke.

"Well, Jake, you are a warrior, of course," Cavillo remarked, "and any one that knows

you knows that well enough, but in this matter you must remember that we two are the fellows who have to stand the brunt of any fighting if the passengers take it into their heads to resist, and with such a man as this sport in the hack, the chances are big that he would not submit to be deprived of his wealth without a fight. You are on the box and couldn't take any hand in the affair without betraying that you are in league with us."

"Yes, that is so, of course," Hungry Jake admitted.

"And this sport is just red-hot when he gets started, too," the stage-agent continued. "The man is no stranger to me. I ran across him years ago in California. I reckoned I knew him the moment I caught sight of his face, but when I tried to pump him he wouldn't have it—said his name was Velvet, but in California he was called Cherokee."

"Oh, yes, I reckon he's a reg'lar man-eater!" Hungry Jake observed, in a rather contemptuous way. "I have heerd of sich fellers afore, and met a few of them. All these sports try fer to make out that they are jest old death, 'cos sich a reputation is useful to them in their business, but nine out of ten of them ain't w'ot they are cracked up to be. I know, for I have tried it on, and I have got away with some of them in the worst kind of way."

"Well, it is a good many years since I met this sport and of course my memory is a leetle hazy, but as near as I can remember, this sharp was an ugly customer to run up against, for he was mighty handy with his fists and awful quick with his weapons," Cavillo remarked.

"That is the kind of lay-out that these sports allers go in for, and sometimes they kin fill the bill and sometimes they can't," the driver remarked, decidedly incredulous.

"He is not a big man, but well put together," the Mexican observed.

He had been closely observing the sport while the conversation had been going on.

"He has a bright eye and a quick, nervous way; the chances are great that he is expert with weapons, and I for one would not care to attack a coach with this fellow inside."

"Oh, now, see hyer, I thought you fellers had more sand than to be skeered jest 'cos you run up ag'in' a galoot who is said to be on the fight!" Hungry Jake remarked in a bantering way.

"Well, Hungry, it is rather late in the day for any one to doubt my courage," Cavillo replied.

"And I think, too, that I have given ample proof that I am no coward!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"Mebbe, but thar ain't either of you anxious for to tackle this sport!" the driver retorted.

"The wise general plans how to defeat his enemy with the least trouble," the Mexican answered. "I, for one, think there is an easier way to accomplish our purpose than to try the old road-agent game."

"So do I!" Cavillo exclaimed. "And with such a man as this sport inside of the coach the chances are big that an attack would not succeed, for he is just the fellow to make a desperate resistance."

"I've got an idee," said the driver. "Couldn't your darter, Manuelita, git 'round this feller and doctor his weapons, so that when he comes to bark he will make the diskivery that he ain't got no teeth to bite with?"

The Mexican shook his head.

"Manuelita is a smart girl, but she cannot accomplish impossibilities," he answered. "There is no chance for her to do the trick."

"Not the slightest!" exclaimed Cavillo, "but she can be of use to us if we detain the birds here."

"How kin that be done?" Hungry Jake asked.

"As easy as from a log to fall," answered the Mexican, immediately. "When I go to the corral to get the fresh horses I can blunder about the business and allow the horses to get out."

"Yes, yes, I see! and we will not be able to catch them in time to get off to-night."

"That is the game exactly!" Cavillo exclaimed. "With the horses loose at such an hour as this there is not the slightest chance of catching them until morning. The travelers will be compelled to remain here over night, and it will be our own fault if we do not get a chance to go through them for their wealth."

"No doubt that we can do the trick, and do it in such a way, too, that we will not be suspected of having any hand in the matter," the Mexican remarked. "For, understand, boys, if it gets out that we are taking toll of the travelers who come this way, it will not be long before the country will be made too hot to hold us."

"No doubt about that, and we must manage matters so that no suspicion will attach to us," Cavillo observed. "We can make a good thing out of it here as long as we are able to keep in the background, but the moment it is suspected that we are the men who are working the trick the jig is up."

"I reckon you are 'bout right," Hungry Jake assented.

"No doubt of it!" exclaimed the Mexican.

"Better attend to the horse business at once," Cavillo suggested.

The Mexican nodded and hastened to the corral, while Cavillo and the driver proceeded to release the horses from the stage.

Just as this sk was accomplished there came a loud cry from the Mexican, and he rushed from the corral swinging his arms wildly in the air.

"The horses—the horses!" he yelled.

The attention of all was immediately attracted.

"What is the matter?" Cavillo cried.

"The brutes have managed to push their way out through the rear door!" the Mexican replied.

"Durn you for a mule-headed son-of-a-gun!" yelled Hungry Jake, apparently greatly annoyed. "That jest settles the matter now! Nary hoss will you be able to ketch until morning, and nary a foot will this old blamed hearse move out of this place until then!"

This announcement greatly excited the passengers, and they at once began to expostulate.

"Tain't no use of wasting yer breath, gen'lemen!" Hungry Jake declared. "We're stuck hyer until those durned animiles are caught, and from what I know of the beasts I would be willing to bet the biggest kind of a pile that it will be morning afore anybody gits sight of hide or h'ar of them."

"What is the matter with using this team?" asked Velvet, coming up to the hack.

"They are lame—can't you see—are you blind?" exclaimed Hungry Jake in an extremely insolent way.

"Not lame enough to hurt, I reckon," Velvet replied, examining the animals with the eyes of an expert.

"W'ot do you know 'bout hosses?" cried the driver, angrily.

"Well, not a great deal perhaps, but enough to understand that these horses will not be materially damaged by a return trip," the sport observed, quietly.

Hungry Jake, deceived by his manner, thought he could bully the sharp.

"You're a durned fool tenderfoot!" he cried.

"You are a liar!" the sport replied, promptly, and then both men reached for their weapons, while the bystanders looked on aghast.

CHAPTER V.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

THE quarrel arose so unexpectedly that all were amazed.

Of course the driver had gone out of his way to provoke the sport, for in the far West, when a man abuses another, in nine cases out of ten weapons are at once called into play.

Hungry Jake prided himself upon his reputation as a fighting man, but in this instance he did not manage matters as well as he might have done.

From the beginning of the conversation with his pards regarding the sport, he had secretly made up his mind to bring about a quarrel with him, not having a doubt in regard to his ability to "get away" with the stranger.

Deceived by the quiet way, though, in which the sport had spoken, he had not anticipated that the other would flare up so suddenly, and so he was not prepared.

Hungry Jake prided himself on his quickness in "drawing," and it was his boast that no man could "get the drop" on him, but in this instance his adversary certainly succeeded in doing so, for before the driver could get his revolver out of its holster he found himself covered with an ugly-looking derringer, which Velvet had produced from within the folds of his ruffled shirt with magic-like quickness.

The sport had raised the hammer of the derringer, too, as he plucked it forth, and as the driver gaped in astonishment at the weapon, he realized that he was in a tight place.

His hand was on the butt of his revolver and he had drawn the weapon half out of its holster, but he did not dare to continue the movement, for he understood only too well that long before he could get his weapon ready for action the bullet of his antagonist would strike him down.

Then, too, the sight of the ugly "fat" little derringer with its big barrel made a great impression upon him, and no wonder, for the sport's pistol carried an ounce ball, and if Hungry Jake had put his thoughts into words he most certainly would have cried:

"Durned if the galoot hain't pulled a cannon on me!"

For a moment the two stood as motionless as statues, glaring upon each other, just as if they were posing for a tableau, and then the sport said in the most quiet, indifferent way possible:

"You had better not pull that revolver of yours or you may get hurt."

According to the "code" which prevails in the wild West and regulates all matters of this kind, the man who succeeds in getting the drop on his opponent is justified in firing the moment he can bring his weapon to bear, and therefore the bystanders were surprised when they saw that the sport did not seem inclined to improve the advantage he had gained.

Hungry Jake was as astonished as the rest.

for if the advantage had been on his side most certainly he would have seized upon the opportunity to "wipe out" the sport.

And, like the ignoble ruffian that he was, he immediately jumped to the conclusion that his opponent feared to carry the matter to the bitter end, therefore he began to bluster immediately.

"You hain't given me no show," he complained, "but I don't keer a continental for that. I am the kind of man who kin stand right up to the rack and take his fodder like a man. You don't ketch me whimpering—that ain't the kind of galoot I am!"

"I suppose you know that you are in a pretty tight place just now?" Velvet said, in an extremely matter-of-fact way.

"Wa-al, I dunno 'bout that," replied the driver, sullenly.

He was perplexed by the manner of the other, and did not know exactly what to make of it.

"You are a dull-minded brute not to comprehend that I hold your life at my mercy," the sport remarked, in an extremely contemptuous way.

"W'ots that?" Hungry Jake fairly roared, and he made a movement as though to bring out his revolver, but there was a peculiar look in the eyes of the sport which caused him to hesitate.

"Don't try that game or I shall have to bore you!" Velvet warned.

"Bore and be hanged!" the driver retorted, angrily. "You can't skeer me! I ain't afeard, even though you have pulled a small-sized cannon on me!"

"See here, I don't want to kill you in cold blood, although I reckon you would not have shown me much mercy if you had been quick enough to get the drop on me," Velvet observed, abruptly.

"You kin jest bet yer bottom dollar on that!" Hungry Jake admitted. "When I git into a difficulty I go in for blood, I do!"

"And you would have plugged me instanter, eh?"

"Wa-al, that is the game, isn't it?" the other rejoined, rather sullenly, for the idea had just occurred to him that his antagonist was endeavoring to get him to make admissions so that he—the sport—would be justified in slaying him on the spot.

"Yes, I suppose that is the game, as you justly observe, and therefore I am at liberty to send you to kingdom come as quickly as the Lord will let me."

Again the driver noted the peculiar glitter in the eyes of the other, and despite all his bravado he turned pale.

He had faced death many a time undauntedly, but never had the grim king of terrors approached in this quiet way, and the soul of the desperado was awed.

"Wa-al, I reckon you ought to give me some show for my life!" he exclaimed.

"What kind of a show do you want?" the sport said. "I reckon we both started even, and if I have succeeded in getting an advantage, it is because I am a smarter man than you are."

"I hain't had no show, nohow," Hungry Jake observed, doggedly.

"Do you want to start fresh?"

"Yes, that would suit me to death!" the driver exclaimed, eagerly.

"Well, as I am one of the most accommodating men in the world, I suppose I will have to give you another chance," the sport observed, with a good-natured smile, and then, in an extremely dextrous manner, he let down the hammer of his pistol, only using one hand for the operation.

Quick was Hungry Jake to improve the opportunity thus afforded him.

Out came his revolver with a flourish.

A thorough-paced scoundrel in all respects, he had no scruples in taking advantage of the generosity of the sport, who had thus really given him his life.

In truth he chuckled over the misplaced confidence of his antagonist.

"Now then I reckon you are my mutton!" he cried.

But never in this world did mortal man make a greater mistake than Hungry Jake when he took the cool Mr. Richard Velvet for a flat.

The sport was only playing with the desperado as a cat toys with a mouse.

He anticipated that his antagonist would attempt to take an unfair advantage of his clemency, and was fully prepared for just such a movement as Hungry Jake saw fit to make.

The lookers-on almost held their breath as, with the utmost interest, they watched the thrilling scene.

They could hardly believe their eyes when they beheld the sport so carelessly throw away the advantage he had gained, and with a foolishness only to be expected of a green "tender-foot," ignorant of the customs of the wild West, put himself in the power of his foe.

The heart of the conspirators beat high though, for they fancied that their pal, at a single stroke, was going to remove the only man of the travelers of whom they had the least fear.

The Englishman and the German professor though were sincerely sorry, for they had taken a fancy to the frank and open-spoken sport, and either one would have ventured much to save him.

But neither the Briton nor the Teuton were of the stuff of which Western heroes are made, although both brave men; in an emergency of this kind they were not quick to act, and most certainly the sharp would have fallen a victim to the desperado if he had depended upon either of the two for aid.

Richard Velvet though was a man who never called upon his pards to fight his battles, and in this instance he soon showed that he was amply able to take care of himself.

His dropping of the derringer from the level was a dodge to make his opponent reveal his game.

He felt certain from what he had seen of the stage-driver that he would be quick to take an unfair advantage the moment an opportunity was afforded him, so the drawing of the revolver and the exultant cry of Hungry Jake was not a surprise to him, but the action he took astonished everybody, the stage-driver in particular.

Hardly had Hungry Jake got the revolver out of its holster when, with astounding force and quickness, the sport planted his left fist right between the eyes of the desperado, the shock causing a myriad of stars to dance before Hungry Jake's bewildered vision.

Over backward went the man, for he was not braced to resist any such shock as this, and a less powerful stroke even than the one he received would have prostrated him.

He came down with a violent crash, and the concussion sent his revolver spinning out of his hand.

Again the sport had the advantage.

The Englishman could not refrain from expressing the admiration with which this magnificent stroke filled him.

"Splendid—splendid!" he ejaculated. "I never saw a better blow in my life, and yet I have seen all the best men in England put on the gloves."

"Ach, himmel! dot vas peautiful!" the German cried.

While from the lips of the stage-agent and the Mexican came curses, not loud but deep.

For a moment the prostrate man lay motionless, blinking up at the sky as though dazed by the blow he had received.

In truth Hungry Jake was more stunned by astonishment than by the stroke, although in all his rough-and-tumble encounters he had never received such a blow.

Slowly he rose to a sitting posture and glared in a doubtful sort of way at his conqueror, as though he did not know what to make of the man who had handled him so easily.

And Velvet even now did not seem to be anxious to improve this second advantage which he had gained, for he stood with his hands resting upon his hips without making an attempt to draw a weapon.

CHAPTER VI.

MANUELITA.

PERCEIVING that the sport did not menace him, Hungry Jake rose slowly to his feet, and then in sullen anger glared upon Velvet.

The driver was a hard-looking customer at any time, but now, with his face disfigured from the effects of the awful blow—for already it had begun to show—he looked like a tough of the first water.

The antagonists were only some six feet from each other, and the bystanders gazed in eager curiosity to see what would be the next move in the game.

"Say, you are something of a cur to attempt to take advantage of the man who spared you when your life was at his mercy!" the sharp exclaimed in contempt.

"Wa-al, I reckon out in this country that everything goes," Hungry Jake replied with a scowl.

"That may be your code, but it isn't mine, and I reckon you will not find many square men, even in this wild region, who will stand up for such a thing. Fair play is a jewel the world over. Your life was mine by all the rules of war, yet when I refrained from pressing my advantage, you tried to jump on me like a thousand of bricks. That may be your notion of a fair fight, but it isn't mine."

"Wa-al, I never axed no odds of nobody!" the desperado replied. "I wouldn't have squealed if you had plugged me."

"You are game, I see," the sport remarked, a peculiar look in his eyes.

"You kin bet yer bottom dollar on that!" Hungry Jake declared. "I am game to the backbone!"

"You are just the kind of man that I like to run up against!" Velvet declared. "When I fight I like to meet a foeman worthy of my steel. And now then let us finish this picnic."

"I will count one, two, three, draw! and the quickest man takes the cake."

This announcement was made in a brisk busi-

ness-like way, just as though it referred to a commercial transaction rather than to a duel to the death.

Hungry Jake surveyed his antagonist, a stolid expression upon his face, as though he did not exactly comprehend the other's meaning.

"What is the matter? Don't you catch on?" asked the sport after a moment's pause, finding that the other did not seem inclined to speak.

"Oh, yes, I reckon I know what you mean all right," the driver observed, slowly.

"Well, don't you feel inclined to go into it?"

"I reckon I don't," the driver answered, sullenly, for the admission thus forced from him was an extremely unpleasant one to make.

"Ah, you are satisfied, then?"

"Yes, I'm no hog—I know when I have got enough!" Hungry Jake answered, gruffly.

"Well, you are a wise man. There are a heap of folks in this world who never have sense enough to know when they have enough," the sport observed.

The driver would never have admitted that he was whipped had he not been fully satisfied he stood no chance in a contest with the sport, and he said as much.

"I reckon, too, that I am as game as they make 'em," he added, in conclusion, "but game or not a man would be a fool to tackle a fighter whom he knows right well 'was too much for him."

"Your judgment does credit to your sense, and if you are satisfied I certainly ought to be. And now, suppose you see if you can fix these horses up so we can go through to Apache City to-night."

"I tell you 'tain't possible!" Hungry Jake protested. "One of the beasts might get through all right, but the other will be so dead lame before five miles are covered that he will not be able to pull a pound."

"The horse has been off his feed and feeling badly for about a week now," Cavillo hastened to say.

"It don't make the least bit of odds to me, gents, whether you go on or not, you know," Hungry Jake remarked. "As far as I am concerned I kin tell you that I had a heap sight rather put in the night at 'Pache City, where thar is all's plenty of fun going on, than to have to hang up hyer, though Mike Vernado has got as handsome a gal as any one of you pilgrims are likely to run across in a month of Sundays."

"We will do our best, gentlemen, to make you comfortable, of course," Cavillo remarked. "But you mustn't expect to find anything but the roughest kind of accommodations in such a hole as this."

The travelers glanced around them as the agent spoke, and the outward appearance of the two cabins certainly did not promise much comfort within.

Then Hungry Jake led the horse up and down, so that the others could see for themselves how unfit the beast was to travel.

The beast was indeed far worse than he appeared to be at first sight, and the travelers saw that there was no chance for them to go forward until the runaway horses were captured, and Cavillo assured them that there was no probability of their being able to get hold of the absent steeds until the morning.

"They have tried this trick a couple of times before," the agent said. "But after being out all night they hanker for their oats in the morning, and will put in an appearance on their own accord."

"I am sorry for the delay, gentlemen, but it is one of those things that cannot be avoided, and it will not hurt you much to rough it here for one night."

There was no gainsaying the truth of this statement, and the pilgrims came to the conclusion that it was no use to worry about the matter.

"Vernado here will take care of you," Cavillo remarked. "He has plenty of room in his cabin, though it ain't no hotel, and Manuelita, his daughter, is as good a cook as any man ought to have. We cannot give you any fresh meat, for all we have here is game that we kill ourselves, and it happens that we are just out. But we have plenty of salt pork and beef, and a nice mess of trout, which I caught this morning, so I reckon you won't starve."

"Oh, no, not on such a lay-out as that," the sport responded.

The Englishman and German expressed their satisfaction with the prospect, and then the Mexican conducted the three to his home, while Hungry Jake and Cavillo took the horses to the corral.

Vernado's cabin was a good-sized one for a structure of the kind, and within was divided into three rooms with a small garret overhead.

The front room was a large apartment which served for a living room, and in the rear were two smaller ones, used as sleeping chambers.

Hungry Jake had spoken truly when he said that the Mexican's daughter was a good-looking girl, as the travelers quickly decided after getting a view of her.

She was no chicken, though, as the Englishman observed to his companions, when a temporary absence of the father and daughter from

the room gave the strangers a chance to speak freely.

She was fully thirty, and there were dark lines upon her face which told of care and trouble—and of dissipation perhaps, as the Englishman suggested, evidently a shrewd judge of his fellow-beings.

The pair had been to make an examination of the larder, and when they reentered the room the girl expressed a desire to know the names of the gentlemen who had so abruptly been thrown upon her hospitality.

So they were duly introduced, the Englishman first, then the German professor, and at last the cool sport, Richard Velvet.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, gentlemen," said the girl, playing the hostess as gracefully as though she had been the mistress of a palace all her life and used to entertaining distinguished guests. "I do not remember to have ever had the pleasure of seeing any of you before, but I trust that this will not be our last meeting."

The gentlemen gave suitable replies, and then Manuelita made the announcement that she did not think the supplies in the house would be enough to furnish two meals, and suggested that her father should take his gun and see if he could get a few birds, while she would take the fishing-tackle and try for some more trout up the stream.

Vernado willingly complied with the request, then Manuelita, excusing herself to the guests, also departed, first placing chairs for the gentlemen and begging them to be seated.

"That has been an extremely handsome girl," the Englishman remarked.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that, but there are lines in her face which seem to indicate that she has seen a great deal of trouble, and that undoubtedly has had considerable to do with the impairment of her charms," the sport observed.

"Gentlemen"—and then the German professor came to a full stop and looked around him cautiously as though afraid that he might be overheard, and wishing to make sure that he would not be before he spoke, "that woman is a devil! In her eyes a man can see der glitter. I have seen it myself often—in der mad-house. I would not for der life of me trust dot woman further than I could see her."

"Oh, I guess it isn't as bad as that," Velvet replied. "These Mexicans are a fiery race, but if a man understands how to get along with them he will not have any trouble."

"Dot may be, but I would not trust dot woman!" the German asserted.

"Oh, I suppose she has a temper of her own, but, like a singed cat, I don't believe she is half as bad as she looks," said the Briton.

"Mine gracious! such a woman as dot was Lucretia Borgia, who was mit der poison so handy!" declared Poppenheim.

"Oh, no, I think not; she may look daggers, but I will wager that she will not use any," the Englishman remarked.

The gentlemen were seated so that the sport faced the window while his companions had their backs to it; this was due to the girl who had so arranged the chairs. Velvet thought nothing of it at the time, although he saw that the Mexican girl was desirous that he should take the particular chair which he now occupied, and, old hand though he was, he was astonished when Manuelita made her appearance outside, at such a distance from the window as not to attract the attention of the others, and by signs made known her desire to speak with him in private.

That the girl had something of importance to say he felt certain from her manner, so, rising, in a careless way he told his companions that he was going to look around for a minute or two.

Outside, around the angle of the house so as to be concealed from the view of the men at the corral was the girl.

"I must speak with you for a few moments," she said, hurriedly. "I will be ten minutes' walk up the stream. Be cautious!" And then she hurried away.

CHAPTER VII. THE WARNING.

RICHARD VELVET was not a man who permitted himself to be much surprised by anything that happened, as the reader has probably suspected by this time, but on this occasion he was astonished.

"Now, what the deuce does this mean?" he questioned as he watched the lithe figure of the girl as she made her way into the wilderness which surrounded Junction Flat.

"If I was a man who was proud of his personal appearance I should be apt to believe that the girl had taken a fancy to me, but as I am not that kind of a fellow, and most decidedly she did not act after the fashion that maidens generally adopt when on a flirtation intent, that idea will not answer."

"To judge from the expression on her face the business is a serious one, and then from the pains she took to keep the thing a secret, it seems more than probable that it is a matter of some moment."

"Ten minutes' walk up the stream she said," he mused, reflectively. "Let me see! I reckon

I had better use some strategy in this undertaking. I will not march off up the creek so that if anybody sees me, suspicion may be aroused, for if I take the same route that the girl has taken any observer will be sure I have gone after her, and then all the fat will be in the fire."

"I can make a detour and easily strike the stream again."

So, acting on this resolve, Velvet sauntered down the valley a short distance, and then struck off to the right, and when he was within the timber, concealed from observation, he circled around so as to strike the stream again a short distance above the settlement, but far enough away so that none of the men could see him.

"After reaching the valley the sport followed the stream and in a few minutes came in sight of the Mexican girl, who was engaged in fishing in a deep pool, which apparently was alive with trout, for already the girl had secured a half dozen fine speckled beauties, and as the sport came up she succeeded in landing a fish which would weigh nearly three pounds."

"There," she said, as she deftly strung the fish on the forked twig with the rest, "that will do for the present, and I am glad that I have succeeded so well, for now I will have a few minutes to talk to you, and suspicion will not be excited by a prolonged absence. But we must not remain here, for there is a chance that some of these scoundrels may wander up this way; it is not probable, yet still possible."

"And it is always best to be on the safe side," the sport observed, as he followed the Mexican girl into the shelter of a clump of pines.

Amid the pines the rocks cropped out of the earth, and Manuelita, selecting one for a seat, motioned the sport to another.

"What I have to say is important, but can be said in a few words," she began. "I see you do not remember me."

A look of surprise appeared on the face of Velvet.

"Remember you?" he said. "Why, we have never met before."

"Yes, we have, but I see you have forgotten the circumstance."

"I have, most assuredly, and yet I have an extremely good memory for faces, and seldom fail to remember any one whom I have once met."

"Your memory is at fault this time," the girl responded. "Ten years ago you were in San Diego—"

"Ah, yes, yes, I reckon I can place you now!" the sport exclaimed. "You are the lady who was being ill-treated by a Mexican ruffian at the door of a fandango hall?"

"Yes, and you interfered in my behalf, and although the brute told you he was my husband, as though he considered that that gave him a right to do what he liked with me, you did not go on your way and leave me to be abused."

"Of course not; that is not the kind of hair-pin that I am," the sharp responded; "whether he was your husband or not he had no right to strike you with a raw-hide whip, as he was threatening to do when I interfered."

"Yes, you took my part at the peril of your life, for when he saw that you would not be intimidated, he called to his companions, who were in the fandango hall to come to his assistance."

"Yes, I remember, and then there was a pretty little skirmish as I ever saw, for I had friends, too, who rallied to my side, and inside of five minutes we whipped the Mexicans out of their boots," the sport remarked. "After the fight was over I looked for you, but could not find you."

"I seized upon the opportunity to make my escape," Manuelita explained. "I had fled from my husband some time before, unable to put up with his brutal treatment, and happened to meet him that night just by accident, and he of course gladly seized upon the chance to punish me for my desertion."

"I see, I see."

"I know I ought to have stayed to thank you for the aid you had rendered, but I acted on the impulse of the moment, which was to get away from the man I hated and dreaded as soon as possible."

"Of course, quite natural under the circumstances."

"Yes, I was in fear of my life, for my husband had sworn to kill me upon the first opportunity."

"And I haven't the least doubt that he would have kept his word, for he was a vile desperado."

"Ah, you knew him, then?"

"Yes, I had run across him before. He was a member of Durango John's band, as big a set of scoundrels as ever stole a horse or murdered a man."

The girl cast a piercing look at the sport, as though she would read his very soul.

"I believe you are right," she said, slowly, "although he always tried to conceal from me the fact that he was a member of an outlaw gang. Did you ever see this noted Durango John?"

The question was put in a careless way, just

as if the girl attached no particular importance to it, but her eyes were fixed intently upon the sport's face.

"Well, that is a hard question to answer," Velvet replied, in an indifferent way, as though he attached no importance to the matter. "I was in the section where the fellow and his gang operated for some time, and I suppose I must have run across him on a hundred different occasions, but as the ladrones always wore a disguise—so it was said, you know—I reckon I never saw the man as he really was."

"Then you would not be apt to know him again if you encountered him?"

"Well, the chances would be against it, I reckon."

"I know I ought to have found some opportunity of thanking you for the great service which you rendered me, but I had a chance to get away from San Diego that night and I was quick to improve it, for I feared my husband's vengeance."

"Very natural under the circumstances."

"Yes, but my haste and fear were needless, for my husband never recovered from the wounds he received in the fight."

"Yes, I knew he was laid out, but as his friends carried him off I hadn't any idea in regard to whether he was dangerously hurt or not."

"He was, and died within a week, so I may thank you for having relieved me from a tyrant who most certainly would have killed me sometime."

"The fellow provoked his death for he was red-hot for a fight."

"Yes, he relied upon his friends for victory. But how comes it that you say your name is Velvet now when you were called Cherokee then?"

"That was only a nickname given me by my pals."

The explanation was a reasonable one and contented the girl.

"It is a good ten years since you rendered me that service, but I have never forgotten it. Something told me that we should meet again, and that I might have an opportunity to repay you. The time has come. You are in danger. These three men are three scoundrels—even my own father is one—and they mean mischief."

"So I suspected from the first," observed the sport, coolly, not exhibiting the least surprise.

"I noticed the driver fooling with the foot of one of the horses while he was unharnessing the beast, and when the brute displayed such lameness I jumped to the conclusion that he had come some dodge on the horse to make him go lame. The horses escaping from the corral too excited my suspicions, and I got the idea that a scheme was being worked to keep us here over night."

"Yes, there is no doubt about it, I am sure of it, although I know nothing whatever about the matter; they have not taken me into their confidence, for I suppose they do not dare to trust me," the girl observed with bitter accent. "I have seen too much of such work though not to have my suspicions excited when any vile scheme of this kind is afoot."

"Yes, I have seen a little of such things too, and I fancied that all was not as it should be. The horse business first excited my suspicions, and then when this driver went out of his way to pick a quarrel with me, I was sure that some mischief was afoot."

"And you are the only man of the three whom they fear. Your companions look as if they had money, but they are not men who would be apt to offer a stout resistance."

"No, I reckon that neither one of them is much on the fight."

"I presume the plan will be to separate you from the others to night. You will be sent to one house and they to the other. The fat fellow who came on the mule is already in the corral fast asleep in the hay."

We have neglected to state that immediately after he had finished the recital of his story, Joe Bowers had led his mule to the corral, and had curled himself up in the hay for a good long sleep, being completely tired out by his extraordinary ride, so he had not been a witness to the encounter between Velvet and Hungry Jake, in which most certainly he would have taken a hand if he had been present.

"You think then that they are likely to jump on me first?"

"Yes, for you are the only one they will be apt to consider dangerous."

"That is true enough."

"So be on your guard, and watch what you drink, for they may attempt to dose you."

"Thanks for the warning, and you may rest assured that I will keep my eyes open."

The girl rose and Velvet followed her example.

"I have paid my debt and am satisfied!" she cried. "Be on your guard!" And then she hastened away.

The sport on returning to the Flat took the same roundabout way that he had followed in coming to the meeting-place, and as he came into the settlement at the lower end while the girl came from the upper trail, no one suspected that there had been a meeting between the two.

Darkness soon came on, supper was prepared, and the travelers partook of it.

Then they sat in conversation until after nine before the huge open fireplace in which some logs of wood blazed.

By this time the Briton and the professor began to grow sleepy, and they were assigned to one of the sleeping-rooms back of the apartment in which they were, and Velvet was conducted to the other cabin, which only contained two rooms, and the inner one was given to the sport.

It was a fair-sized apartment, with a window looking toward the creek, through which the moonlight was now streaming.

Upon the floor were a couple of buffalo-ropes, and Cavillo, who acted as guide, said that with the aid of these he "reckoned" the guest could manage to pass the night in comfort.

Velvet responded that there was no doubt of it; then Cavillo produced a flask and invited the sharp to take a nightcap before going to sleep.

Velvet exclaimed that it was just what he wanted, and apparently took a big drink.

Then the agent retired.

The sport surveyed the room. The window was fastened; there was a latch on the door, and by putting a bit of wood in it its moving was prevented.

"Now I don't exactly see how the fellows are going to get at me, although I suppose they reckon that the drugged whisky will lay me out so I will not be able to hear a noise if they are compelled to make one," he mused, and then arranging one buffalo-rope to serve as a bed, he laid himself down upon it and drew the other over him.

"Let me see," he murmured, as he drew one of his revolvers—a self-cocker—and placed it by his side, ready for action; the buffalo-rope concealing the movement, so that if any watchful eyes were on him they would not be able to see what he was about; "the programme is for me to get sleepy, for that whisky, so freely tendered, was drugged beyond a doubt, and after I am asleep they will go for me, but I don't exactly see how."

The moonlight streaming into the room rendered all objects as visible as by day.

The sport drew the buffalo-rope well up over his head so as to conceal the fact that he was on the watch.

A half-hour passed away—an hour, and then a slight noise in the small loft over the room attracted his attention.

The ceiling was only rough boards laid upon cross pieces.

One of these was slowly removed, and through the opening thus made glared the dark face of the Mexican, Michael Vernado.

"Hello! here comes one of the rascals at last," the sport muttered, his hand on his revolver.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRAPPER ENTRAPPED.

FROM the position assumed by Velvet, the buffalo-rope being drawn over his head, thus casting a dark shade upon his face, it was impossible for the man peering down through the hole in the ceiling to discover that he was not asleep, but on the watch.

Vernado listened intently for a moment as if he believed he could tell from the breathing of the sleeper if he was fast in slumber's chain, and then, apparently satisfied that all was right, he proceeded to let himself down through the hole, feet first.

The ceiling was a low one, only about seven feet high, and the Mexican, agile almost as a cat, despite his years, found it no difficult matter to drop to the floor almost noiselessly.

The moment he gained the room he crouched upon his hands and knees, drew a long, glittering knife, and then, with cat-like stealth, approached the supposed sleeper.

Velvet had decided upon his course of action.

He had shifted his hand from the butt of the revolver and now grasped it by the barrel.

When the Mexican reached the side of the prostrate man he reached out his left hand and with a dextrous motion threw back the buffalo-rope; but at the same moment the sport rose to a sitting posture and dealt the Mexican a blow on the head with the butt of the revolver which laid the would-be assassin senseless upon the floor.

The sport remained motionless for a few moments after the stroke was given, listening intently.

He was anxious to learn if the Mexican's pards were with him.

Not a sound came to his ears though to denote that any one was near.

"I reckon it was arranged for him to try this riddle alone," the sport remarked after being satisfied that no pard accompanied the assassin.

"Well, all I have got to say is that the kingpin is not as smart as he is cracked up to be, or else he wouldn't have let me fool him so easily; still, the way I pretended to swallow the whisky was what did the business; and then, too, the

fellow could not have suspected that I had been warned, and so was not on his guard.

"But now I must look after my friend here, for when he recovers his senses he will be apt to be ugly. I hit the fellow a harder crack than I intended in the excitement of the moment, but these Mexicans are a thick-headed race, so I reckon he is not killed outright."

An examination showed the surmise to be correct.

Vernado was only stunned, not killed.

The sharp proceeded to remove his weapons, and after having disarmed him waited for his senses to return.

The stroke had been a heavy one, but as Vernado possessed a remarkably thick head he was not materially damaged by it.

He sat up and gazed around him for a moment in a bewildered way and then his look fell upon Velvet, who was seated on the buffalo-rope, a revolver in his hand.

A fearful scowl appeared on the face of Vernado and he reached for his revolver.

The sport noted the action and laughed when the Mexican made the discovery that the weapon was missing, and glared in baffled rage.

"Oh, no, that dodge will not work," Velvet observed, in a matter-of-fact tone. "You are in a fix and there is no two ways about it. You have come for wool and will return shorn. Your little game will not work."

Vernado glared at the sport like a caged wild beast; surely he was in the toils if ever a man was, but he was silent, for he knew not what to do.

"Well, what have you to say for yourself?" the sport asked at last, finding that the Mexican was not disposed to speak.

"Not much," replied the other, folding his arms with grim resolution.

"Are you going to make a clean breast of it?"

"In regard to what?" Vernado asked, with an ugly scowl.

"Why, this little game that you and your pards are running here."

"Little game?" he asked, with a stolid expression, as though he was in doubt as to what the other meant.

"Yes, you know what I mean well enough."

"Indeed I do not!"

"Oh, but I know what you are up to, you and your pals; don't try to pull the wool over my eyes, for you cannot. I am too old a stager not to see your little game; in fact, I suspected it from the first."

Now the Mexican's expression of surprise was really genuine.

"Suspect! what did you suspect?" he exclaimed.

"Why, that you two fellows here were in league with the driver of the hack, and that your game was to arrange matters so that we pilgrims would be compelled to remain here over-night, and then you would have an opportunity of going for our wealth."

"You are the son of a witch!" cried Vernado, in amazement.

"Yes, and the seventh son of a seventh daughter, and that is how I came to get onto your little game so quickly. I understand all about the laming of the horse and the escape of the others from the corral, and the whisky that your pal tendered me was doctored, of course, but I was not so green as to take a nightcap from the hands of such a man as Durango John."

The Mexican fairly started with surprise, for this announcement was entirely unexpected.

"What do you mean by that?" he exclaimed.

"Who is Durango John?"

"You know well enough; you were a pard of his when I first ran across him in San Diego about ten years ago, and I must confess I was somewhat surprised to see you two here together, for I thought both of you had been either shot or hanged long ago. Now don't try to persuade me that I don't know what I am talking about," the sport added, perceiving that the Mexican was about to speak, "because I tell you, frankly, that chicken will not fight. This agent here, Cavillo, as he calls himself now, is Durango John, one of the biggest scoundrels who was ever known in the annals of the West."

"You cannot prove it!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"Well, I don't see what good it will do me to attempt to prove it. I know it to be a fact and that is sufficient. Anyhow, I have got you foul, and through you I reckon I can get at Durango John."

"And now I am going to talk business to you!"

The voice of Richard Velvet deepened, and a stern look came into his eyes.

"You have attempted my life, miserable assassin that you are, and if I had not been on my guard you would have slain me with as little mercy as though I had been a wild beast."

"Now it is my turn, and I will give you just five minutes to make a full confession, and if you do not, I will kill you with as little compunction as though I was a hangman and you a guilty wretch condemned by the law."

"Five minutes only, remember—while I can count a hundred, say."

And then the sport began to count, while the Mexican stared at him with a pallid face.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MEXICAN WEAKENS.

IN moments of great peril the thoughts of a human are apt to move quickly, and on the present occasion before the sport had counted fifty, the Mexican had discussed the situation, in his mind, in all its particulars.

That the sharp was fully in earnest and would be as good as his words, Vernado did not doubt.

Death stared him in the face; at the end of the hundred his thread of life would be rudely cut in twain by the bullet of the man whom he had attempted to murder in his sleep.

In vain he racked his brains to devise some means of escape.

There was none.

His doom was sealed—his death as certain as that in time the sport's lips would say, "one hundred."

The Mexican was brave enough, but even the bravest man who ever lived might wish to escape such a doom as this without its reflecting upon his courage.

"Seventy-five," came from the lips of the sharp.

The count now seemed to be hastening to its end with wonderful rapidity.

"Hold!" cried Vernado, "do not go on! I will do as you wish."

"That is where your head is level," Velvet remarked.

"Yes, why should I sacrifice my life to shield my associates?" the Mexican exclaimed.

"Just so!"

"They would not do as much for me."

"No, you can bet your last dollar on that, and you would call the turn, every time!"

"No, no, if either one of them was in my place, and they saw death confronting them, they would not hesitate for a moment to betray me to escape with life."

"No doubt about that. 'All that a man hath will he give for his life,' quoted Velvet.

"I would be a fool indeed to sacrifice myself for men who would throw me overboard in an instant if it was to their interest so to do."

"Yes, I reckon that you are looking at the matter in about the right light now."

"You have not made any mistake in this matter. Cavillo is Durango John, and he and I were in San Diego at the time you mentioned," the Mexican admitted.

"Durango John remembered you, and also recollected that at San Diego you were not called Velvet but Cherokee."

"He is right about that; but I fancy that he, with all his smartness, did not suspect that I recognized him."

"No, he did not; you see, he had changed greatly in his personal appearance, while you look about the same."

"Yes, I have found the fountain of youth that Ponce de Leon sought for so eagerly in Florida, and have grown younger in ten years rather than older."

"Well, you have not aged in the least—that is, as nearly as I can remember, for at first I could not recall you at all, although Durango John recognized you at once."

"I don't wonder that he reckoned I would not remember him, for in the old time he was a dashing kind of fellow, wore his hair long and dressed like a prince."

"Yes, he has sobered down somewhat since that time, and then this is a different kind of a country, too, and if he went around with the swagger that he used to indulge in, suspicion that he was anything but an honest man would at once be excited."

"But he is trying the same old tricks, though?"

"Yes, we are taking toll from all travelers who come this way who are worth plucking."

"And that is the game you are playing to-night?"

"Oh, yes, and we anticipated making a rich haul—not out of you, for we know well enough that sharps of your kidney do not usually carry much wealth around with them."

"Very true, that is the rule generally, and as far as I am concerned, you and your pards never made a better guess in your lives. I have a few dollars, of course, but not enough to warrant a man in risking his life to get hold of the ducats."

"Well, we did not think there was any risk, for the whisky was drugged and Cavillo said you took a hearty drink of it."

"Yes, I fooled him completely, but you fellows are not as smart as you ought to be after your long experience, or else you would never have tried to work such a stale old trick on a sharp like myself."

"I was doubtful," the Mexican remarked, suddenly, "but I was overruled by Durango John. He declared he could do the trick, and firmly believed he had, and I, like a fool, undertook to look after you, while Durango John and Hungry Jake went through the other two."

"And were they dosed also?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I hope their death was not a part of

the programme!" exclaimed Velvet, as the thought occurred to him.

"No, no; no reason for doing away with them, but we all regarded you as dangerous, and we reasoned that if we did not kill you, you would be apt to kick up such a row when you discovered you had been robbed that we would all be in danger."

"I see; quite a compliment, but I can't say that I appreciate it under the circumstances," the sport remarked, dryly. "And now that I understand how the land lays, I must look after your pards."

"What was the programme—if everything worked all right? Suppose you had succeeded in killing me, what then?"

"I was to join the others, then we would bury the plunder and in the morning make a great row about our being robbed and lay the blame upon a gang of scoundrels who have been operating in this section for some time."

"Yes; a nice little game, and these night-raiders would be given credit for having killed me."

"Exactly."

"Well, let me see," said the sport, meditating upon the matter. "I must try to arrange some way to spoil your pards' little game. Open the door and we will take a look and see how they are progressing."

As the Mexican advanced to the door the quick ears of the sport detected a slight noise coming from the outer room.

"Hello, hello!" he cried. "I reckon some one has been playing the spy upon us. Open the door as quickly as possible! It was one of your pards, of course—finding that you were taking more time to settle me than they thought was necessary, one of them came to look into the matter, and the chances are big that the discovery has been made that the trick has not worked as they anticipated. Go ahead! If your pards are game there is a chance for a lively fight."

The Mexican threw open the door and passed through the other room to the open air, the sport following closely at his heels, a revolver in each hand.

Velvet's supposition was correct.

There had been a spy in the outer room.

Durango John and Hungry Jake had succeeded in carrying out their part of the programme without any trouble.

The "night-cap" which the stage-agent had so kindly proffered had been accepted by both the Englishman and German without the slightest suspicion, and as the whisky was good—a decided contrast to the poor stuff common to wild western regions—the travelers disposed of it readily.

The effect of the drugged liquor was to make them so drowsy that they gladly sought their rude couches, and within five minutes after lying down were wrapped in the deepest kind of slumber.

So completely did the drugged whisky do its work that the pair of scoundrels had no difficulty in stripping the travelers of their valuables without disturbing them in the slightest degree.

Then they came forth, wondering why the Mexican did not make his appearance.

They suspected from the delay that something was amiss, and Durango John proceeded to play the spy.

But when he discovered that the trapper was entrapped—that the Mexican had not only failed to kill the sport, but had been captured by him, and at the muzzle of the pistol forced to betray the secrets of the gang, told Durango John had no idea of showing fight, though he and his pard, the driver, were two against one.

They had "sampled" Mr. Richard Velvet and wanted no more of him.

The confederates sprung to horse, and as the two men made their appearance in the door of the shanty away went the outlaws at the best speed of their animals.

"Well, your pards have evidently come to the conclusion that discretion is the better part of valor," Velvet remarked, decidedly disappointed at the retreat of the ruffians.

"The cowardly curs!" cried the Mexican, angrily. "To run away and leave me here to bear the brunt of everything."

"Do you suppose this is the last of them in this locality?"

"Yes, I have no doubt of it; they know they have been discovered—they have succeeded in making a good haul, and they are going to get away with it if possible. Neither one of the two will be seen again in this section for some time, I will warrant."

The sport was silent for a few moments, thinking about the situation; then he said, abruptly:

"Vernado, do you think you could be an honest man for a while if you tried hard?"

"Well, I don't know," replied the other, in a sulky way.

"Because if you think you could, I am disposed for your daughter's sake, to give you a chance. I will keep quiet in regard to your share in this night's work, and all the blame can be left upon your pards."

The face of the Mexican brightened.

"I am much obliged for the chance, and I will do the best I can."

"Yes, try it, just to see how it goes; but let us examine and see if your pards have made a clean sweep of it."

They had, indeed, but it was not until morning that the full damage was ascertained, for the Englishman and the professor slept so soundly, thanks to the drugged liquor, that it was not possible to waken them.

The German, though, with the craftiness of his race, had a couple of hundred dollars sewed in the lining of his vest, and this escaped the bandits; and as he was willing, nay, anxious, to share with the Briton, the pair were able to proceed.

In due time the three reached Apache City, but within a week all were ready to depart, for none of them accomplished anything.

The Englishman could find no trace of either the girl or man whom he sought; no one had ever heard of the German's mysterious valley; and the sport said there was no money in the town for him.

"I tell you what it is, gentlemen, come with me to the south'ard!" he exclaimed. "You may be able to strike a trail there; anyway, you will see a live settlement, for there's no place in all this region that goes ahead of my town of No Man's Camp."

CHAPTER X.

A SURPRISE.

GIDEON WHITE, mayor of the mining-town known as No Man's Camp, sat in his private apartment in the rear of his store.

The mayor was still the same big, blustering fellow, who was so fully described in the story which related Injun Dick Talbot's adventures in No Man's Camp, when we introduced him to the notice of our readers.

A year has elapsed since the events described in that tale occurred, and now again we carry our readers to that strange settlement, as rude and rough a town as can be found in all the wilds of the West.

The mayor's sanctum was only a small apartment, partitioned off from his store, and was scantily furnished. All the "outfit" that the room could boast was a small "bunk" in one corner, a rough table and three chairs in the center and a small desk against the back wall, with a cracked mirror over it.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening; a candle burned upon the table, and Gideon White, seated in a chair, tilted back against the wall, was enjoying a cigar.

His clerk, popularly known as Slim Sam Beaver, stuck his head in at the door, which led into the store, and said:

"Boss, Bulldog Bill would like to have a talk with you if you ain't busy."

"Run him in!" commanded the mayor.

Slim Sam nodded, withdrew, and in a few moments the man who bore such a strange cognomen made his appearance.

Any one who saw Bulldog Bill, though, would not have wondered at the nickname, for the bearer of it had a head which wonderfully resembled that of a bulldog; and his figure, too, bore a likeness to that of a brute.

He was short and stout—extremely thick-set, with bandy legs, and his bullet-shaped head, with its muscular, projecting jaw, thick, flat nose, and low, retreating forehead, made him look decidedly like an animal.

But for all his looks, Bulldog Bill Donovan was one of the leading citizens of No Man's Camp.

He was the proprietor of the Little Brown Jug saloon, one of the "mints" of the town, although it bore a terribly bad reputation, for it was the resort of the worst men in the camp, and rarely a night went by without it being the scene of some desperate quarrel.

Rarely, though, did the fight which usually followed, take place in the saloon itself, for the owner particularly objected to this, for, as he said, things were too durned expensive in No Man's Camp for to have them smashed to atoms by a fighting mob.

Bill was a fighter and a desperado himself, and, aided by the hangers-on of the saloon, usually succeeded in getting the quarreling men to adjourn to the street in order to settle their differences, and few cared to rouse the anger of the proprietor by crossing him in his wishes.

The mayor and Bulldog Bill had always got on very well, on the principle, probably, that birds of a feather flock together.

"Take a chair and make your elf comfortable," said White, waving his hand to one by the table, and then he produced a cigar.

"Have a smoke?"

"Thank ye, don't keer if I do," responded Bill, who was as slow and laborious in speech as he was short and thick in stature.

The new-comer bit the cigar and sat down.

"Just got back?" the mayor asked.

"Yes, this morning."

"Been away some time, haven't you?"

"Nigh onto a year."

"How did that happen?"

"My brother did in New York; he run a saloon thar—and left some ducats, and the lawyers went in to beat me out of 'em; had to

fight 'em for near a year afore I could collar the boodle."

"I see; well, how does the camp look to you—see many changes?"

"Oh, yes, she is booming; I reckon the town has come to stay; but, I say, how 'bout this Black Mac business? The boys are giving it to me that this hyer Dick Talbot ran the marshal out of the town."

The face of the mayor grew dark, and he shook his head in an ominous way.

"Well, I reckon you are getting it pretty straight," he responded.

"Durn me if I thought thar was a man on top of this hyer foot-stool who could down Black Mac in this hyer camp!"

"Yes, the camp would have gone broke on that."

"How did it happen? When I left town this hyer Talbot stood a good chance of being hanged for the murder of Maxwell."

"Ah, yes, I remember, you did light out jest about that time," the mayor observed, reflectively.

"Well, he managed to get clear of that charge; 'Frisco Nell, of the Golden Hairpin Saloon, helped him out, and then he went in to set himself up for a chief, and he managed to lay out some good men, too, and, finally, he and Black Mac locked horns; I don't exactly know how the thing was worked, but he got the best of Mac and the marshal was obliged to emigrate, and, arter a while, this sport married Diantha Maxwell, sister of Donald Maxwell, who was killed, you know, and so got possession of the Heather Bell Mine."

"Been living in clover ever since, I reckon?"

"Yes, he has been doing well."

"Pears to me the boys of the camp didn't stick to the marshal the way they ought, or else this sport would never have been able to run him out."

"He got an under grip on Black Mac and had him in such a way that nobody could do much for him," the mayor explained.

"Mac was a friend of mine, and I did all I could for him, but it was no go; the sport had him foul, and saltpeter wouldn't save him."

"Say, the boys are giving it to me that this Talbot thinks that No Man's Camp would be the better for being purified a bit, as he puts it," Bulldog Bill observed, slowly, a dark look upon his ugly face.

"Yes I have heard it said that he reckons we run things a leetle too loosely hyer! Jest think of a sport of his kind talking like a Sunday-school man!" exclaimed the mayor, in disgust.

"Enuff to make a man sick!" Bulldog Bill replied. "Say, Sandy Jones is marshal now?"

"Yes."

"Wa-al, Sandy is a pretty good man, but he ain't got backbone enuff to run sich a camp as this."

"He don't try to run it the way Black Mac used to; he kinder stands in with the boys and tries to git along easy."

"Yes, I see; wa-al, that is all right with the boys that know him, but when a strange rooster comes in and allows that he kin run the town, why, then, he has got to be climber."

"In such a case as that, Sandy gits some of the boys to help him."

"He ain't Black Mac by a jugful!" Bulldog Bill asserted.

"I tell you w'ot it is, Mister White, if I had been in this yere camp when the fuss took place, this sport would never have run Black Mac out of it!" the saloon-keeper continued. "I would have stood up for him, tooth and nail, and I have a sweet gang at my back who would have raised merry blazes, too! Yes, sir-ee, we would have made this camp too hot to hold this hyer sport; he would either have dusted out of it, or else we would have filled him as full of holes as a sieve."

"Well, I don't know exactly how it was," the mayor responded. "But, as I tell you, the sport got an under grip, and Mac preferred to quit; he didn't think he stood any show, and so he levanted."

"I reckon you fellers didn't stand up for him as well as you might," the saloon-keeper persisted.

"We did the best we could, but when Black Mac was willing to give it up what could we do? I have allers had an idea that Mac would come back some time and go for the sport, but I reckon he won't, for if that was his game he would have been back long ago."

At this point Slim Sam stuck his head in at the door again.

"Man wants to see the mayor."

"Run him in."

A few moments and a stranger made his appearance. A man dressed in the usual rough fashion common to the mining districts; only he wore a sort of a pea-jacket. A fine crop of bushy red hair covered his head, and a short beard of the same hue hid his chin.

After entering, he closed the door carefully behind him, and placed his back against it so as to prevent any one from entering.

This movement seemed to the mayor and saloon-keeper so decidedly hostile that they immediately reached for their revolvers.

"Go slow, boys," the stranger said, in tones which were decidedly familiar to the ears of both the men.

And then the man took off the wig and beard, and Black MacGregor stood revealed.

The astonishment of the pair was great.

"Talk of the devil and he appears!" Mayor White exclaimed.

"You have come back!" Bulldog Bill cried.

"I have returned to seek for vengeance upon Dick Talbot!" Black Mac replied.

"And I am with you, every time! You kin count on me to the death!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed, and he got up and shook Black Mac's hand warmly.

Mayor White also clasped his hand, and assured him that he could be counted upon.

Then Black Mac resumed his disguise, which was so perfect as to defy recognition, and sat down, saying as he did so:

"I don't want any one to know I am in No Man's Camp yet awhile, so I will transform myself into somebody else."

"We were just talking about you," the mayor remarked. "Bill hyer has jest come back to the camp, been away nigh onto a year, and I was posting him in regard to what has taken place."

"Yes, and I was a-saying that if I had been hyer no sport like this Talbot would have run you out of town!" the saloon-keeper asserted.

"Well, he put up a job on me and worked the thing to the queen's taste, so I had to go, for I stood no chance to make a successful fight; and I have had wretched luck, too, since I have been away or else I would have been back to have another tug with him long ago. Money is the sinews of war, you know, and there wasn't any use for me to come back to fight this Talbot without being well heeled."

"That is true enough."

"In the last few months luck turned and the ducats came tumbling in, and now I have come back to No Man's Camp with an army at my back, and I propose to put this sport through a course of sprouts, and if I don't either kill or run Dick Talbot out of this town inside of a month, then money is no good and this galoot can't be whipped!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE PLOT.

"It ain't so, don't you be afeard of that!" Bulldog Bill exclaimed; then he got up and solemnly shook hands with Black Mac.

"Who is this sport, anyway?" he queried as he resumed his seat. "Wot kind of a man is he? We have had some pretty hefty galoots in the camp afore, and Mac hyer allers succeeded in knocking 'em out."

"Well, this Talbot is a good man. thar are no two ways about that!" the mayor asserted. "If he hadn't been a good man he would not have succeeded in getting the best of Mac hyer, and I helped Mac too all I was able."

"Oh, yes, we must not make the mistake of underrating the man," the exile declared. "He is a dangerous foe and we will not be able to get the best of him without a hard fight."

"That is so!" the mayor asserted.

"Wa-al, of course you two know more about the cuss than wot I do," Bulldog Bill observed in his slow way. "I don't blame ye for going in for to make a sure thing of it, and I am with you, boys, anyway you want to play the game."

"I have got a scheme all cut and dried," Black Mac remarked.

"Spit it out! we are in with you to go the whole hog!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Yes, you bet!" cried Bulldog Bill.

"Well, there is not any use of mincing words about the matter," Black Mac remarked. "This fellow got the best of me in every way, and nothing short of his death will satisfy me."

"That is the talk!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed. "That is me to a ha'r; when I have got it in for a man I want to kill him and don't you forget it!" The fellow displaying all the ferocity of the brute after whom he was named.

"Talbot not only run me out of the town, but spoilt my game in every way," the exile asserted.

"That is as true as gospel," the mayor remarked.

"In the first place I arranged a nice little plan to get hold of the Heather Bell Mine, which is as valuable a piece of property as there is in this section," Black Mac continued.

"The death of Donald Maxwell gave me a chance, and if it had not been for this sport there is no doubt the mine would have fallen into my hands."

"That is true enough," Mayor White assented. "I know how well Mac was playing the game, and he would have come out a winner beyond a doubt if this man Talbot had not interfered."

"Yes, and then I had my plans laid to marry Diantha Maxwell," Black Mac remarked, a dark frown on his face. "I wanted the girl, and I would have got her too had it not been for this

sport; so you see he has upset my game generally."

"Wa-al, you kin square the matter now by sending him to blazes!" Bulldog Bill exclaimed.

"That is the programme!" White remarked.

"But how are you going to work it?"

"I have had my spies in the camp for some time, so I am well posted in regard to all that has transpired lately."

"Then you know that Talbot is not in the camp at present?" the mayor asked.

"Yes, and that is the reason why I am here. I intend to take advantage of his absence to seize the Heather Bell property."

"Good as wheat!" cried Bulldog Bill, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "That is the talk! that is war, that is!"

The mayor looked a little doubtful.

"I say, Mac, that is a pretty strong measure, you know, and though of course as mayor of the camp I will do all I can to help you, yet you want to keep inside of the law if you can."

"You see, the camp has changed a great deal during the last year; a great many new men have come in, and the majority of them are honest, hard-working miners, who were attracted by the report that we had a boom hyer, so that the camp is not half as rough as it used to be, and if you go too far thar may be trouble."

"Oh, don't you be alarmed about that," Black Mac replied. "I am going to act inside the law, every time. I am going to jump the mine because I claim that it belongs to me. Here is a bill of sale of the Heather Bell property, executed by Donald Maxwell to me, on the day of his death, as it happened, to secure me for the sum of twenty thousand dollars, which he owed me," and as he spoke Black Mac drew a large pocketbook from the breast-pocket of his peajacket, and took out a legal-looking document which he gave to the mayor.

White examined the paper with great interest.

"Yes, yes, this seems to be all right and regular," he observed, slowly, "and you have two witnesses, I see, Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy."

"Yes, they happened to be in the neighborhood when the paper was drawn out, and we called them into the office to witness it: of course they were pledged to keep quiet about the matter, for Donald Maxwell didn't want the thing to get out, but they will swear to seeing the paper executed, though, and heard Maxwell admit that he had received the money."

"Suppose I was a lawyer, trying to find a flaw in this thing, and should ask you how it was that you came to loan Maxwell such a large amount of money?" the mayor asked.

"The reply is readily given; Maxwell and myself had been playing poker for some time, and the twenty thousand dollars represented the amount of his losses."

"Yes, yes, I see; and this paper is all in Donald Maxwell's handwriting, too."

"You can bear witness to that."

"Oh, yes, I am well acquainted with his writing, but it is a pity, though, that you didn't have some better witnesses than Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy," White observed, reflectively. "The reputation of both of them is pretty bad, and most men would be apt to say that for a ten-dollar slug the galoots would be willing to swear to anything."

"That's so!" Bulldog Bill asserted. "Them two backs would swear the legs off of an iron pot and a hole through the bottom afterward. They are no good! Bigger liars ain't to be found in the camp."

"Well, they were the only men handy, and the fact that the paper can be proven to be in Donald Maxwell's handwriting is a point which will help their testimony."

"Yes, that is true enough, unless somebody comes forward and swears that they know you to be an expert penman, capable of imitating almost anybody's handwriting," observed Gideon White, shrewdly.

"Yes; but where is the man who can do that?" Black Mac asked. "There is not a soul in the town who knows anything about my talents in that line, with the exception of yourself, and I reckon you ain't going to tell what you know."

"Of course, not!" Bulldog Bill exclaimed. "The rifle is a good 'un, and you kin make it as easy as rolling off a log."

"You see, backed by this paper, I will have a good excuse for seizing the mine," the exile observed. "And the chances are that I will not have much trouble about the matter, for Talbot is absent, totally unsuspecting that any danger threatens, of course, or else he would not go away, and the men at the mine will not be on their guard, so it is likely I can jump the claim and secure possession without much trouble."

"It is a bully scheme!" cried the saloon-keeper.

"It certainly ought to work," the mayor remarked.

"After I get possession of the property, then Talbot, when he returns, will have to raise an army to get me out, and in the fight I calculate to be able to lay him out."

"But, I say; how about the girl, Diantha—Mrs. Talbot, as she is now?" asked the mayor.

"Will she not be apt to raise a row? and the miners, you know, will be sure to sympathize with a woman."

"My game is not to allow her to tell her story," replied the plotter.

"After I secure the mine I will have her carried secretly away by some of my men and confined in a lonely cabin which I have had built in a secluded spot a few miles from the camp."

"You, Mr. Mayor, will receive a letter from the lady in which she admits that my claim to the mine is good and states that rather than attempt to take the property from me by force she would prefer to buy me off, and has gone away to raise money for that purpose."

"By thunder! that is the biggest kind of a scheme!" cried White, impressed with the skill with which the plot had been arranged.

"I rather think it will work," Black Mac responded, with a grim smile of satisfaction. "And if anybody dares to doubt the truth of this, or to object to my measures, I do not see what they can do, for I calculate to have every fighting-man in the town who is willing to take money for his services, and by so doing I can raise a force big enough to crush all opposition."

"It will work—it will work, you kin bet your life onto it!" the saloon-keeper cried, rubbing his big hands together in exultation.

"I don't see any reason why the thing won't be a big success," White remarked.

"It is a big thing for you that Talbot is out of town, for you will gain such an advantage that he will not be able to make much of a fight when he returns."

"As I told you, I have had my spies here for some time—ever since I got money enough to enable me to go ahead, in fact, and the moment I learned that Talbot had left the camp I hurried here so as to strike the blow before his return."

"By the way, have you any idea where he has gone?" Black Mac asked, abruptly.

"No, none at all," the mayor replied. "I s'pose his wife knows, but no one else does, as far as I know, for Talbot is a terribly close-mouthed fellow."

"So my spies reported; all they could learn was that he went to the north, but where he was bound or when he would return they could not find out."

"My little game, though, is, after I have secured the mine, to put a party out on the road so as to intercept Talbot."

"Ah, yes, I see; wipe him out before he can get to the camp," the mayor said.

"Yes, that is the scheme; come the road-agent business on him, and then no one will be able to trace his death to my door."

"It is jest bully, and you kin count me and all my gang in," the saloon-keeper exclaimed.

"When will you make the move?" the mayor asked.

"To-night; no time is to be lost; strike when the iron is hot; that is my motto! That is the reason why I came, so you would know what was up. By midnight I will be master of the Heather Bell property!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE ATTACK.

THE shades of night had fallen upon No Man's Camp; steadily the hours passed away until midnight came, and the hum and bustle which always prevailed in the town during the evening began to diminish.

One by one the miners departed for their homes, the groups of loiterers in the saloons dispersed, and only the all-night men—the gamblers and drinking fellows who turned night into day and kept the hours sacred to the owl—remained up in the town.

One by one the places of public resort shut their doors and put out their lights as their patrons departed, until only the two all-night resorts, the Golden Hairpin Saloon, kept by the dashing girl known as 'Frisco Nell, and the Little Brown Jug Ranch, Bulldog Bill Donovan's shebang, remained open.

It was the boast of these two places that they never closed, but they did, though, for No Man's Camp was not yet a big enough metropolis to furnish patrons to keep two games running every night in the week.

Both of the saloons had done an unusually good business on this night of which we write, and the wide-awake mistress of the Golden Hairpin Ranch had wondered why it was that on this occasion so many of the well-known tough citizens of the camp seemed to be so well supplied with money; men who were seldom known to be flush seemed to be lavish with their ducats, wandering from saloon to saloon, "setting 'em up" for the boys with extreme liberality.

Then, too, there appeared to be quite a number of strangers in the camp, all of them tolerably hard cases, too, unless their appearance greatly belied them, and these men also seemed to be flush with the solid stuff.

The girl, being a close observer, did not fail to notice these facts, and was greatly puzzled to account for them.

The camp toughs and the strangers appeared to go in little squads, three to five men in a

group, and the quick apprehensions of the girl warned her that something out of the common was about to happen.

What it was, though, she could not guess, and the more she reflected upon the matter the greater she was puzzled.

She racked her brains to solve the mystery; there was not anything going on in the camp as far as she knew to account for the thing, and as the keeper of the principal saloon in the place, of course she was well posted as to the news of the day.

About midnight the patrons of the Golden Hairpin began to disperse, but between twelve and one the girl noticed that the toughs appeared to be as plentiful as ever, apparently disposed to keep it up all night.

The curiosity of 'Frisco Nell was so excited that she called her "head bouncer"—as the brawny fellow whose business it was to keep order in the saloon was termed.

Old Man Mike Finnigan this party was called, a muscular six-footer, able to handle with ease any ordinary man, although he was well advanced in years.

"Mike, do you notice all these tough fellows hanging round to-night?" she asked.

"Yes; 'deed I do; thar's an army of 'em, an' I bin expectin' trouble, for they are all h'isting freely, but I reckon we won't have any arter all, for they 'pear to be quiet," the bouncer answered.

"There's a good many strangers."

"Right you ar', an' I have jest been a-wondering whar they all come from, 'cos I didn't notice any of them to-day."

"No, they were not in the town, they must have struck it since nightfall."

"I reckon so."

"Something is up."

"Pears like it was."

"I wish you would go out and see if you can discover what is going on."

"All right."

The bouncer departed—was absent some fifteen minutes, and then returned.

"Can't find out anything," he reported, "though I tried for to pump some of the boys. It beats all how they are throwing out their money to-night. I axed a few of 'em how it was that they were so flush with their rocks, but they all allowed that they wasn't flush, they had caught on to a few ducats, enuff to pay for a drink or two, but that was all."

"There is something wrong!" 'Frisco Nell exclaimed with a decided shake of her beautiful head. "I don't know what it is, but I am satisfied that all is not right."

"Pears that way to me," the bouncer observed with owl-like gravity.

At half-past one all of the toughs suddenly vanished from the Golden Hairpin and as they did not return, 'Frisco Nell, who was the prey of a nervous apprehension for which she could not account, again sent the bouncer forth to reconnoiter.

In a few minutes he returned with the information that there was a 'big game running at Bulldog Bill's place, and that there was twenty-five or thirty of the fellows congregated there.

"Some mischief is afoot!" the girl declared, impressively. "And, strange as it may appear, I have an apprehension that it threatens me, or some one in whom I have an interest."

"Wa-al, I reckon they ain't a-going for us hyer!" the bouncer declared. "I hope not, anyway, for if the gang over thar should go in to work together, they could clean out anything in the camp."

At two o'clock the last patron departed from the Golden Hairpin Saloon; none of the toughs had returned, and again 'Frisco Nell sent Old Man Finnigan forth to see what he could discover.

This time the bouncer reported that there was only a small poker-party in the Little Brown Jug Saloon, and that all the roughs had disappeared.

"I tried to pump Bulldog Bill," the bouncer said, in conclusion. "Axed him if he didn't think the town had been unusually lively to-night, but he wouldn't have it. Said he did not think business had been brisk—he had not taken in as much money as usual."

"The man lies," 'Frisco Nell declared, promptly, "that is, if his place has done anywhere near as well as we have. I am satisfied that our bar has done a third more to-night than usual."

Although haunted by strange and unaccountable apprehensions, the girl was not able to discover that there were any good and substantial reasons for them, although while her men were closing the saloon she took the trouble to go out in the street in order to see if she could discover anything.

She even went so far as to peep into the Little Brown Jug Saloon, which was still open, not apparently intending to close.

There were a few men playing poker in the back of the saloon, all solid citizens, the mayor among the number, but none of the toughs were visible.

"There is danger in the air, though—I can feel it!" 'Frisco Nell muttered, as she slowly returned to her saloon.

And 'just as the girl was uttering the thought a strange scene was transpiring in the outskirts of the town.

The Heather Bell Mine was now employing eight men, but only four of them slept on the property.

There was a watchman, a big Irishman answering to the name of Andy Flynn, who kept guard during the silent hours of the night.

There was a large rock which cropped out of the earth amid a little clump of pines about twenty feet from the main entrance to the mine, and this was the watchman's favorite resort.

He could sit on the rock, lean back against a convenient tree and enjoy his pipe while the night hours waned.

It was insinuated that Flynn often was able to catch a nap while he was supposed to be keeping a vigilant watch, but this the Irishman always indignantly denied.

On this night of which we write, as everything was quiet, the watchman had been taking a nap, but woke up about two o'clock, refilled his pipe and proceeded to enjoy a quiet smoke.

Just as he got his pipe well-lighted he heard footsteps approaching, and up from the road which led to the town came a man whose uncertain steps betrayed that he had been indulging in more liquor than was good for him.

"Bedad! there's a big timperance lecture!" exclaimed the watchman as he witnessed the irregular approach of the man.

When the fellow came up so the watchman could see him distinctly—the moonlight rendered all objects almost as visible as by day—Flynn saw that the man was a stranger, a big, muscular fellow with red hair and beard.

"Faix! I don't think I have ever been afther seeing this chap afore," the watchman muttered.

The man got within a couple of yards of Flynn before he perceived him, and then he straightened up and made him a low bow.

He attempted to perform this movement with a great deal of dignity, and as a result lost his balance and would have fallen flat if the watchman had not caught and held him up.

"Hould on there!" Flynn cried. "You will be down on the fore-front of yer face the furst thing ye know."

"My foot slipped—dreadful slippery ground all up this road," the stranger responded, with true drunken gravity.

"Oh, yis, if ye had skates on ye could have a foine time," Flynn remarked, sarcastically.

"Say, is this hyer the Heather Bell Mine?" asked the stranger, peering around him.

"It is the same."

"This is the place I want, then."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes; and you're Mister Flynn, I reckon."

The addition of the mister to his name, a compliment which was rarely bestowed upon him, pleased the Irishman.

"Yes, sur," he replied, very graciously. "I am Mister Flynn."

"Andy Flynn?"

"The same, sur."

"Old hoss, you are jest the man I want to see!"

And the stranger wrung the Irishman's hand violently.

"Is that so?"

"You bet all yer ducats onto it! I've got a message for you that will be worth a heap of money to you. Jest put yer ear down so I kin whisper it to you."

The unsuspecting Irishman complied, and as he bent his head the stranger improved the opportunity to deal him a blow with the butt-end of a revolver which laid him out as flat as a pancake, knocked at once into insensibility.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTURE.

THE movement was so adroitly performed and so entirely unexpected by the watchman that it succeeded to perfection.

"So far, so good!" exclaimed the assailant, surveying the prostrate figure of his victim with a deal of satisfaction.

All appearance of drunkenness had vanished, so it was plain it had only been simulated to deceive the Irishman so as to throw him off his guard.

Then from the capacious pockets of the pea-jacket which the stranger wore he produced a lariat and a cloth bandage with a pear-shaped lump in its middle.

With the lariat he bound the unconscious Flynn hand and foot, trussing him up so neatly that he had no more use of his hands and feet than if he did not possess those members.

Then the new-comer bound the bandage around the watchman's head, placing the pear-shaped lump in his mouth, thus gagging him so that it was not possible for the man to utter a word.

The object of this was to prevent the Irishman from giving an alarm when he recovered his senses.

"Now then, I reckon you are all right!" the assailant exclaimed, when the job was completed.

The reader, of course, has long ere this guessed that the supposed drunken stranger was

the ex-marshal of No Man's Camp, Black Mac, disguised.

When he had completed his task of rendering the watchman of no more use to himself or anybody else than a dead man, Black Mac proceeded to search for the key of the gate which gave admission to the mining property.

It was in the Irishman's pocket, as he expected, and when Black Mac's fingers closed upon it, a smile of exultation appeared on his dark face.

"This gives me the mine!" he exclaimed.

Then, rising to his feet, he strode down the road in the direction of the mining-town.

After going a couple of hundred yards he stopped and gave utterance to a shrill whistle.

The effect produced by the whistle was as though the utterer of it had been an enchanter weaving a magic spell.

The surrounding country was quiet and desolate, giving no sign of life, but the moment the sound of the whistle died away on the air, it fairly seemed to teem with men.

From behind each rock and bush and tree, a muscular man started up, and each and every one fairly bristled with weapons.

'Frisco Nell's suspicions were correct; her woman's instinct had discerned that there was something wrong, and this mysterious power had not deceived her.

The rough characters, the toughs of the town and the strangers who had excited her curiosity by wandering around the town, spending their money so freely, were members of the "army" which Black Mac had raised to seize the Heather Bell property.

There were just thirty-one of the men, all told.

The ex-marshal, it will be seen, did not hold his enemy, bold Dick Talbot, too lightly; he knew that the sharp would make a desperate fight, and so he raised a strong force.

In a fight of this kind ten or a dozen men are all that is usually gathered on either side, so it will be perceived that Black Mac counted Dick Talbot to be worth alone fifteen or twenty men.

He knew what the sport had done, and he did not intend to peril his chance of success by holding his foe too cheaply.

The fighting-men gathered in the road, around their chief.

A reader of the tale which related Dick Talbot's first experiences in the town of No Man's Camp would recognize some old acquaintances, men who had braved the power of the daring sport, and greatly to their discomfiture.

There was the burly Tiger of Tucson, swaggering, blustering Johnny Sands, and at the elbows of the bully were Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy, while in the rear was Doc Reddy—Redmond O'Donohue—well steeped in liquor as usual.

The doctor was the thirty-first man, a non-combatant, though, who had come along to look after the wounded.

For secretly as the force had been raised, each man being pledged to keep quiet about his engagement, the doctor had got wind of the matter and had followed in the rear.

When the signal was given and the members of the "army" came from their hiding-places and flocked around their chief, Doc Reddy came also.

He gazed at the stranger with curiosity, wondering who he was and what he was up to.

The doctor was immediately spotted though, and to his intense surprise the stranger called him by name.

"Well, Doc Reddy, what are you doing here? I reckon you don't belong to this outfit?"

The Irishman was a keen fellow whether in or out of liquor, and now that the fighting-men had massed together in the immediate neighborhood of the Heather Bell property, he quickly came to the conclusion that the movement was directed against that mine.

"Oh, I was only out for a walk, do ye mind, jist like all the rest of these gentlemen, but if it is a private party I will retire, though if there is going to be any fuss to the fore, it is a b'ye like meself that would like to take it in, if ye hav'n't any objection."

Black Mac reflected upon the matter for a moment.

After all what difference did it make whether the Doc saw the attack on the mine or not?

And if any one should happen to get hurt in the affair then his professional skill would come in play.

"All right, Doc, you might as well stay now you are here, but if there should be any trouble you will be expected to know nothing about it if the matter comes up hereafter."

"Upon me wourd, I will be deaf, dumb and blind!" the doctor protested.

"Don't ye be afeard about that, I am a medical man and know me business. A docthor like a lawyer niver tells tales out of school."

"See that you keep to that," Black Mac warned.

And then he proceeded to arrange his force for the attack.

The army was divided into three sections, ten men in each division. Johnny Sands, the Tiger of Tucson, was at the head of one body, Lead-

ville Mat commanded the second, and Bow-legged Billy the third.

Calling the leaders to one side Black Mac imparted to them the plan of the campaign.

"You thoroughly understand it now?" the ex-marshal queried in conclusion.

"Oh, yes," the three answered in a chorus.

"Get your men ready then."

The three rejoined their commands.

"Now mind, boys, not a word as we advance!" Black Mac continued.

"We must come the Indian dodge and make a complete surprise of it, and the least noise as we move on might upset the whole thing."

"See that your weapons are all in working order now, before we start."

The command was immediately obeyed, and the click of the revolvers rung out shrilly on the still night air as the desperadoes tested their weapons by revolving the cylinders.

"Ready now—forward, march!" commanded Black Mac when the operation was finished.

On went the attacking force, and as the "host" swept past the clump of pines by which the gagged and bound watchman lay, Flynn's eyes grew big as he noted the array.

The Irishman had recovered his senses by this time, and although he could neither move nor speak, yet he had the use of his eyes, and much he marveled at the unexpected sight.

He had lived too long in the West, though, not to understand what it meant, and now he knew why he had been attacked.

The Heather Bell claim was going to be "jumped."

The watchman cursed his unlucky stars which had permitted him to be so easily overcome, for if he had not been surprised and had been able to give an alarm, the men within the works would have had some chance of protecting the property.

But as this blow had descended so suddenly, and with as little warning as thunder out of a clear sky, there was no chance to put the defenders of the property upon their guard.

Thanks to the key which Black Mac had taken from the Irishman's pocket an easy entrance was gained to the mine.

The ex-marshal was familiar with the ground, and so, after getting his force within the gate knew exactly what to do.

The four men who lived on the property occupied the shanty nearest to the gate.

The other house, larger and more elaborate, and some hundred feet from the gate was occupied by Talbot and his wife.

Johnny Sands and his band had the job of capturing the workmen, which operation was performed without any trouble, for, as the door of the house was not locked, the intruders gained admission without rousing the inmates, and the first intimation that the miners had that anything was amiss was when they were rudely awakened from their slumbers to find themselves surrounded by armed men who bade them get up and get out as soon as possible.

When the astonished miners asked the reason for this treatment they were informed that the mine had been jumped by a party who thought he had a better claim to it than the man who was now running it.

In utter amazement they asked who it was, but to this question the only answer vouchsafed was that if they held their breath, in time they might find out.

To the second squad—Leadville Mat's detachment—was assigned the task of putting the works in condition to stand a siege. The third, Bow-legged Billy's party, accompanied Black Mac to the main house, and there the ex-marshal thumping loudly on the door cried:

"Open in the name of the law!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BLACK MAC'S CROWNING STROKE.

IN the olden time the Scotch people were great believers in the mystic power to foretell the future which was known as second sight.

To certain families and to certain persons of those families only were these marvelous powers given.

The seer, or seerss, for both male and female had the gift, would at times fall into a dreamy trance, and during that time visions of the future would come to them.

We stated that, in the olden time, there were many believers in the existence of this marvelous power, but, to state facts correctly, we should have said that the superstition still prevails to a large extent among the Scotch people, and the beautiful girl, Diantha Maxwell, or Diantha Talbot, as she is now entitled to be called, with all her education, had a faint belief that there was something in the old superstition.

This was not wonderful when it is considered that the Maxwells are one of the old Scottish clans, and to members of the Maxwell family the mystic power of reading the future had been given.

And if a member of the Maxwell family doubted this, it would be showing a decided disrespect for old family traditions.

Diantha was a believer—not a strong one, but yet not a skeptic.

And as since the departure of her husband she

had been troubled with bad dreams in which all sorts of horrid shapes appeared, she was sure that some heavy disaster was about to fall upon her, and for the last three nights she had been so disturbed that she had refrained from removing her clothes upon retiring for the night.

So when Black Mac thumped upon the door, and called upon her to open in the name of the law, she was not so completely taken by surprise as she would otherwise have been.

There was something in the tones of the man which seemed familiar to her, although for the moment she was not able to tell who it was.

For a moment she hesitated to comply with the command, but then when she reflected that if she refused admission the applicant could easily force an entrance, she concluded that there was not anything to be gained by being ugly about the matter.

She had a small revolver concealed in her pocket, too, a trusty tool, and one which she knew how to use, and so she was not so afraid as she would have been if she had been weaponless.

So she opened the door.

The readers of the tale, Dick Talbot in No Man's Camp, will remember that in that story, in which Diantha Maxwell played so prominent a part, she was described as a blooming Scotch beauty.

A year has passed since the events occurred described in that tale, the maid has become a wife, and her beauty has increased rather than diminished, and Black Mac, who had not seen her for a twelvemonth, was struck by this fact when Diantha appeared in the open doorway, and the moonlight shone full on her face.

"What is the meaning of this?" the girl exclaimed in astonishment, as she beheld the large force of armed men in possession of the mine.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am," said Black Mac, disguising his voice by assuming a harsh tone so that he would not be recognized, "but we have been commanded to seize this property by order of Judge Welch of Tombstone."

"And why should such an order be issued?" exclaimed Diantha amazed.

"On account of debts owed by your husband, Mr. Talbot, in Tombstone. He has fled the country, and as we can't get hold of him, his creditors have levied on this mine."

"But this is absurd!" cried the girl, not knowing what to make of this strange affair. "Mr. Talbot does not owe anybody in Tombstone, for I know he has never been in the place."

"He told you that, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, it ain't so; he did not tell you the truth, ma'am. He has been there—got into a lot of trouble through some mining speculations, and lit out between two days owing a lot of money; if we could get at him now, we would not bother with this mine, but I reckon he heard we were after him and cleared out."

"No such thing!" exclaimed Diantha, indignantly. She had the most utter faith in her husband, and she did not credit this tale at all.

"Mr. Talbot is away on business and will be back within a week."

"He told you that I reckon jest to pull the wool over your eyes."

"It is the truth—I know it. And even if all you say is true—if my husband does owe money and has fled to avoid the officers of law, that gives you no right to seize this mine, which is my property."

"Well, I reckon Judge Welch don't know that," Black Mac observed, slowly, as if he was astonished by this statement.

"My orders were to seize the property and of course I must obey. But if you were to go and see Judge Welch now perhaps the thing could be straightened."

"Where is the judge?"

"In a cabin a little way up the gulch where we had our headquarters; the judge came all the way from Tombstone to settle this affair."

"I will go at once if you will conduct me."

"Certainly, I will be glad to oblige you. I will get a couple of horses ready, for it's a little too far for you to walk. If you will have the kindness to wait a moment I will have the animals up in a twinkling."

"Certainly."

Then Black Mac hurried to the stable where, in obedience to orders which he had previously given, some of the men were harnessing two horses.

The ex-marshal had so arranged the matter that there were no witnesses to the conversation between himself and Diantha, all the men being at a distance.

It was important to the success of his plans that no one should know why the girl went with him.

They would be able to testify that she apparently went willingly enough, but that would be all.

When the horses were ready Black Mac assisted Diantha into the saddle, mounted himself, and the pair set out, taking the northern trail.

Black Mac had given orders so that the captive workmen of the mine should see the girl depart with him, and after that they were conducted to the outside of the Heather Bell prop-

erty and released; then the gates were closed and the preparations begun to stand a siege.

The workmen discovered the watchman, Flynn, as they started for the camp and released him from his bonds greatly to his delight, and straight to No Man's Camp the party hurried, eager to tell the story of the seizure of the mine.

Meanwhile Black Mac and Diantha went on their way.

The girl possessed dauntless courage, and her heart did not fail her even on this strange journey.

Little conversation was there between the two on the way.

After they had gone about a mile and turned from the main trail into a smaller one running to the westward, Diantha put the question:

"Is it much further?"

"Oh, no; only a little way now; you see, we had to select an out-of-the-way spot so as to be able to get our men together for attack without exciting suspicion," Black Mac replied.

"No Man's Camp is a hard town, and if it had got out that there was a sheriff in the neighborhood, with a posse, going to make a seizure, there would be sure to be trouble."

"You are a sheriff?"

"Yes."

"Of Tombstone?"

"Yes; Lynch is my name—Sheriff Lynch, of Tombstone. Tommy Lynch, most of the boys call me when I am home; maybe you have heard of me?"

"No; and yet it seems to me that I must have met you somewhere, for there is something about you that seems very familiar to me."

The ex-marshal did not say anything more, for he was fearful that the girl might recognize him, and it did not suit his game to have her do that just at present.

Fifteen minutes more and they came to a solitary cabin situated in a little valley amid a grove of pines, which clustered so thickly around the house that it was not possible for any one to see the cabin until within twenty feet of it.

As the pair dismounted at the door of the hut the gleam of a light could be distinguished through the chinks of the door.

"The judge is up, anxiously waiting, I reckon, to hear how we succeeded, because it was his idea that we might have a deal of trouble," Black Mac remarked.

He opened the door.

The cabin possessed two rooms. In the outer one a candle burned upon a rude table and a villainous-looking fellow sat by it smoking a pipe.

"Where's the judge?" asked the supposed sheriff.

The man jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the inner door.

"Go ahead! you will find his Honor in there," said Black Mac.

The girl entered the inner room, the ex-marshal at her heels.

It was empty, although from the looks of the apartment one would be led to suppose that it had been recently occupied.

A candle burned upon the table in the center of the apartment, and there was a rude bunk in one corner of the room with buffalo-ropes and a blanket upon it.

But as the girl looked around a sudden chill fell upon her heart, for the conviction came to her that she had been entrapped.

"What is the meaning of this—there is no one here?" she cried, and as she spoke she grasped the revolver which she had in her pocket.

"Oh, I guess the judge will be in soon," the other answered, carelessly, yet keeping a wary eye upon the girl.

"I will not remain!"

She advanced toward the door and Black Mac blocked the way.

"It is as I thought; then I have been betrayed!" she cried, plucking forth the revolver as she spoke.

But the exile was on the watch for just such an action, and seizing the weapon, he wrested it from Diantha's hand.

In the struggle his wig and beard were knocked off and Black Mac stood revealed.

"Roderick MacGregor!" the girl cried.

CHAPTER XV.

MACGREGOR'S GAME.

It was a striking tableau. Diantha started back in amazement when she made the unexpected discovery. Black Mac folded his arms across his broad breast and regarded the girl intently, a trace of sadness upon his face.

"Roderick MacGregor!" repeated the girl, as though unable to believe that her eyes had not deceived her.

"Yes, you are right; it is Roderick MacGregor."

"I never expected to see you again."

"When a man loves a woman as I love you, it is pretty hard for him to keep away from her," he replied, a plaintive ring to his voice.

"You must not speak in that way to me," responded Diantha, sinking into a chair by the table, her strength failing her for the moment.

"And why should I not speak?"

"Because it is not right that you should talk in such a manner to me, and it is not seemly for me to listen."

"Why should not a man who loves a woman as dearly as I love you tell her of his passion?" the ex-marshal demanded. "There was a time when I spoke of my love freely to you and you did not object to listen."

"That was long ago," she replied. "You forget the changes which have taken place in that time. I am now the wife of another, and it is not fit that I should be addressed as though I was an unmarried woman."

"Are you happy with the miserable gambler?" Black Mac exclaimed, bitterly.

"He is no longer a gambler!" Diantha exclaimed, spiritedly, "but is as reputable a citizen as can be found in No Man's Camp."

"Well, you know that is not saying much, for decent, honest men who have never been in any trouble, and were not forced to leave their country for their country's good, are few and far between in this region."

"If I mistake not, your own record is none of the best if the past be searched," she replied, with cutting severity.

"Oh, as to that, my sins were committed in the hot blood of youth," he remarked. "But I never was a card-sharper, traveling through the country, cheating honest men out of their hard-earned gains."

"Neither was my husband!" Diantha exclaimed, the color mounting into her cheeks and her eyes flashing. "But it is not necessary for me to defend him, for he can defend himself."

"Why, Diantha, you speak as if you loved this man!" Black Mac exclaimed, as though surprised at the circumstance.

"Is it so odd, then, for a woman to love her husband?" she demanded.

"Yes, it is odd it seems to me for such a woman as you are to love such a man."

"Enough of this!" she exclaimed, impatiently. "I do not care to discuss the matter with you. And now I should like to have you explain why I was brought here. Is it a trap into which I have fallen?"

"Yes, it is a trap."

"And there isn't any judge?"

"No; no judge."

"What is the object of this infamous scheme?" she exclaimed in indignation.

"Be patient and I will explain the matter to you," Black Mac replied. "In the struggle between Talbot and myself he succeeded in getting the best of it, and I was forced to leave No Man's Camp; circumstances favored this adventurer, and I was placed in such a position that I could not prove myself to be innocent of the foul charges which he brought against me."

"Now in regard to your brother's murder. Donald Maxwell was assassinated in the main street of the camp—shot down without warning by an ambushed foe. I accused this gambler sport of having committed the murder, but I was not able to prove it, and, in revenge, he brought the same accusation against me, but he could no more prove it than I when he was on trial."

"I have always been satisfied, though, that Talbot knew something about the matter, even if he did not commit the deed himself."

"This idea is monstrous!" Diantha exclaimed.

"It is natural, of course, for you to think in this way, but in time you will discover the truth. It was this woman, Frisco Nell, who was at the bottom of the affair," Black Mac remarked. "She hated your brother because he was indifferent to her charms, and when he ceased to visit her, she revenged herself by causing his death."

"It is a dreadful slander!" Diantha exclaimed, indignantly. "I know that it is not the truth, but enough of this! Let us not speak of the past, but discuss the present. Why have you brought me here, and what do you intend to do?"

"That is what I am coming to," the ex-marshal replied. "It was necessary to speak of the past so that we can understand the present."

"I have been greatly wronged, and I should be less than man if I did not attempt to avenge myself."

"But I have never wronged you!" the girl exclaimed.

"No, only deserted me for this gambling adventurer!" Black Mac replied, in a tone of great bitterness.

"You have known me many years, Diantha, and I do not think you ever knew me to be patient under a wrong. No man ever yet gave me a blow that I did not return it with compound interest."

"So it will be in this matter. Talbot triumphed over me—drove from No Man's Camp, and over a year has elapsed since that struggle took place, and as I have made no sign during all the time that I had any intention of renewing the fight, I suppose he has come to the conclusion that I was so thoroughly beaten I would not dare to try to measure strength with him again."

"I do not think that he ever troubled his mind about the matter at all."

"That was natural. He had beaten me to the dust, and he did not think I would have courage enough to try a second fight with him."

"I came of a stout, old Scotch race though, and dogged perseverance is one of the principal characteristics of the line from which I sprung."

"A year have I waited—hungry for vengeance all the while—but biding my time, lingering like the tiger to make my spring more certain. At last the opportunity has come though, and this night I have dealt Mr. Dick Talbot a blow which will be apt to stagger him."

"You took advantage of his absence!" Diantha exclaimed, scornfully. "You did not dare to make this attack while he was at home."

"Exactly, that is the truth and no mistake," the ex-marshal replied, coolly. "It is my game to improve every opportunity, and not to throw a chance away. I am playing to win and I cannot afford to give my adversary any points in the game."

"And yet it seems to me that you have made a foolish move in seizing the mine as you have," the girl remarked.

"Do you think so?" Black Mac asked with a peculiar smile.

"I certainly do; it is a bold and lawless proceeding, and although the men of No Man's Camp are not noted for their respect for the law, yet they will be obliged, in self-defense, to unite to punish any such high-handed outrage as this which you have committed to-night, for if they do not then no one will be safe, and any gang of ruffians can seize what property pleases them."

"I see that you are laboring under a misapprehension," Black Mac observed. "You think I have seized the Heather Bell property without having any claim to it?"

"Most certainly you have!" Diantha exclaimed. "The mine belongs to me, and this story of yours in regard to my husband's debts in Tombstone gives you no right to seize the mine."

"My dear Diantha, that tale was a ghost story, to use the slang saying, and was only told to induce you to accompany me to this place under the pretense of seeing the judge. I claim the mine, not on account of anything that Talbot owes, but by virtue of a claim I have against your brother, Donald. At the time of his death he owed me twenty thousand dollars, and to secure the debt gave me a bill of sale of the mine, and as there were two witnesses present when this was done, both of whose names are affixed to the document, there will not be any difficulty in convincing the citizens of No Man's Camp that I have as good a right to the mine as anybody."

"There is some vile trickery in this!" Diantha cried, indignantly, as soon as she recovered from the shock imparted by this unexpected intelligence. "My brother never owed you any such sum of money. It is not possible, and if it were why was not this claim made public before? Why have you waited all this time?"

"Because I was under a cloud when I was forced from the town a year ago, and circumstances were so much against me that I knew it would be up-hill work to attempt to make good my claim then, but things have changed, and now I feel sure of success."

"You will not enjoy your triumph long!" the girl exclaimed. "My husband will soon come, and then you will be driven from the mine and from No Man's Camp also."

"It is not so easy to predict about a matter of that kind," Black Mac rejoined, "although you seem so confident."

"When Talbot returns he will have to raise an army and fight me for the mine; and as I have possession the chances are all in my favor, and I can assure you that if we do come to a fight I shall do my best to lay out this gambler, and when you are free from him, in the time to come, you may learn to look with a favorable eye upon my suit."

"Never!" cried the girl; "the very thought is abhorrent! Is it possible that you can think so meanly of me as to believe I could bring myself to wed the murderer of my husband?"

"Well, I don't know; you women are strange animals. This Talbot was accused of murdering your brother, and yet you married him."

"But the accusation was false—there was not the least truth in it."

"So you believe, but others think differently. And you jump too quickly to a conclusion; Talbot may not fall by my hand. In fact, he may never return to No Man's Camp, particularly if he hears that I am here, ready for him. He is an adventurer, a man who is ever on the go; long ere this he is probably tired both of this town and you. He is not the kind of man to remain constant to any woman."

"The wish is father to the thought!" Diantha exclaimed, disdainfully. "My husband will return, and then a fearful vengeance he will exact for this outrage."

"Time will tell," Black Mac rejoined.

"And now I must be going. I shall have to compel you to remain here for a while, but you

will be perfectly safe and treated with all possible respect."

"Am I a prisoner, then?"

"Yes; and it is my intention to keep you here until you agree to become my wife. Of course I don't expect you to do that until Talbot is disposed of."

"I will never consent!" Diantha cried.

"You are a woman and likely to change your mind. Anyhow, I will give you a chance to do so," Black Mac retorted. "You will be closely guarded, so do not allow any vain hope of escape to trouble your mind."

And with this injunction the ex-marshal departed, leaving the captive Diantha to gloomy meditations indeed.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE ROAD.

As the reader will remember, we stated in a previous chapter that the Englishman and the German professor, not being able to accomplish the objects which had led them to Apache City, had determined to go with the sport, whom they knew as Richard Velvet, to the strange settlement known as No Man's Camp.

As the reader has probably discerned long ere this, Richard Velvet was no other than our old-time hero, Dick Talbot.

When at Junction Flat he encountered some of the members of the old California Gang of desperadoes, whom he had fought in bygone years. He thought it wise to conceal his name, for he felt sure that Durango John would recognize him if his name came to the outlaw's ears, and so he concealed his identity under a false appellation.

This matter he explained to his companions before they reached Apache City, telling them who he really was, and the others applauded his wisdom.

Joe Bowers, who had gone with the party to the new district, did not return with them, having struck a new "riffle," which he "reckoned" he would play for all it was worth, as he said.

During the trip nothing occurred to vary the monotony of the journey, until the party were within three hours of No Man's Camp, and had pulled up at a supper station.

It was about half-past five in the afternoon, and the sun was just going down behind the far western hills.

Half an hour was allowed for supper, the coach being due at No Man's Camp at nine.

The three pilgrims had the coach to themselves, there being no other passengers.

There were only two men attached to the supper-station, but while they were getting the meal ready, a third man—a rather hard-looking fellow—came from amid the shrubbery of the neighboring foot-hills.

He had a prospector's kit with him, and, to all outward appearances, seemed like an honest miner searching among the foot-hills for traces of gold.

There was something about the man, though, that impressed Dick Talbot unfavorably the moment he caught sight of him, even when the fellow was some distance off, and a casual remark of the driver, who was standing by Talbot's side, gave him a chance to put some questions before the man came up.

"That cuss is as crazy as a loon for to be prospecting for color up in this region!" the knight of the whip exclaimed. "If he had any sense and knew anything 'bout mining at all, he might know that you can't strike pay-dirt in any such district as this hyer."

"Does he expect to?" Dick Talbot asked.

"Yes, he came 'bout three days ago and fixed up an arrangement to bunk in hyer with the boys, so they were jest telling me, while he war prospecting 'round. They give him the grand laugh, you know, and allowed to him that he was only wasting his time, but the fool wouldn't have it."

"He knowed better, so he said. I reckon some cuss has been stuffing him with some yarn 'bout thar being a big gold mine up along this crick somewhar. I reckon I have had that 'ar ghost story given me 'bout a thousand times since I struck the West. Some cuss is allers ready to swap the yarn of a mighty rich strike that he knows, and nobody else does—allers in some valley, with a crick through it—for anything he kin git from a drink upward."

The German professor, who was standing near at hand, began to manifest decided signs of interest.

"What is dot you say, mine frien?" he exclaimed. "Ish dere in stories like dot no truth?"

"Not once in a thousand times!" the driver replied, decidedly.

"Don't it stand to reason that if a man knows of a valuable gold deposit that he is going to seize it himself without letting other people in to share?" Talbot remarked.

"Thar you ar! thar's the thing in a nutshell!" the driver exclaimed.

"No, sir-ee! don't you take no stock in any ghost stories of that 'ar kind!" the driver continued. "It is human nature for a man to gobble all he kin, and nary man wot

strikes a big lead is a-going to give the snap away if he kin help it."

"Why will beobles such lies as dot tell?" exclaimed Prof. Poppenheim, with a disconsolate shake of the head.

"Oh, jist to make a stake sometimes," the driver answered. "And then ag'in, some men are natural-born liars and couldn't tell the truth if they wanted to. They git so used to telling big whoppers that they can't twist their tongues around the truth to save their gizzards."

By this time the proprietor had come up to the party.

"W'ot luck?" asked the driver.

"Wa-al, I ain't struck it yet, but I reckon I will before long," the man answered.

"You won't strike no mine 'round this hyer deestrick worth shucks if you keep on for a thousand years!" the driver exclaimed.

"I reckon I know w'ot I am about," the man answered with a wise shake of the head. "And all you fellers w'ot are grinning at me now will be laughing on the other side of yer mouth when I strike a lead as big as anything which has been diskivered in the district."

"Yes, mebbe we will when you do it, but we ain't a-going to hold our breath while we are waiting for it," the Jehu retorted.

"Why I am jest as sure to do it as that I kin hit that old pine yonder with a revolver bullet!" exclaimed the man, drawing his pistol and taking aim at the stump of a pine which had been blasted by the lightning, standing about twenty feet distant.

"Wa-al, that ain't much of a shot," the driver observed. "You ought to be able to hit that every crack."

"I ain't much to brag on as a shootist," responded the other, "but I reckon I can plug that 'ar' stump."

Crack went the revolver, and the driver set up a shout when he saw that the shooter had missed.

"It is jest as I tell yer!" he cried, "nary gold mine will you strike in this deestrick!"

"I kin hit it now, you bet!" the man exclaimed, and on the third attempt he succeeded.

Just at this point the cook announced that supper was ready, and the miner, putting up his revolver, started for the shanty with the remark that he was hungry enough to eat "a b'ar, claws and all!"

Talbot and the Englishman brought up the rear, the rest hurrying on ahead.

The house was about a hundred yards away from where the party stood, so the pair had a chance to exchange a few words before they reached it.

"Do you know, Mr. Broughton, that I do not like the looks of that fellow?" Talbot observed.

"He certainly will never be hung for his beauty."

"That is so; he is an ugly-looking scoundrel."

"Got a regular hang-dog expression."

"I think he is up to some game."

"Do you, really now?" the Englishman inquired, very much interested.

"Yes, he is no greenhorn—no tenderfoot to waste his time prospecting for gold in such a region as this, where there isn't the slightest chance of striking color."

"He certainly appears like an old and experienced hand."

"Oh, he is; no doubt about it!" Talbot exclaimed, decidedly.

"I have been too long in this country, and have seen too many men to be deceived. This fellow is no honest miner—not the sort of chap to put in his time prospecting; more likely to hang around a saloon trying to catch onto a drink."

"Ah, yes, I see—just what I would imagine."

"The fellow is up to some game, and this pretense of hunting for a mine is only a blind."

"Do you really think so now?" asked the Briton who, during his brief acquaintance with the sport, had learned to place great confidence in his judgment.

"Yes, that is the way I savey. And then this revolver business of his—this firing at the stump—"

"Well, I should say it was kind of a stupid thing, don't you know; regular boy's play, upon my word!" the Englishman declared.

"It was more than that, or I miss my guess," Talbot remarked, significantly.

"Do you think so, really now?"

"Yes, he fired three shots, and there was not any need of his doing it, for the fellow is marksman enough to hit the tree the first time if he had so desired, but it was not his game so to do. He fired three shots as a signal."

"A signal! bless my soul! do you think so?" queried the Englishman, decidedly astonished by this statement.

"Yes, that is the conclusion I have reached."

"But what is the object of the signal?"

"Well, I can only guess in regard to that, of course, for I hav'n't anything to go on but surmise. My idea is that this fellow is the spy of some road-agents who have an idea of stopping the coach at some convenient spot between here and No Man's Camp, and these three shots were fired either to warn his pards that it would be worth their while to stop the coach,

or else to warn them that the game was not worth the candle."

"I see, I see."

"That point will be settled during the journey, and now that we are on our guard I think we will be able to give the fellows a warm reception if they conclude to go for us. Sandy Boags, the driver, is a tough fellow and as square as they make them. I will give him a hint of what is up and we can depend upon his working in with us, every time."

"By Jove! this is really exciting!" the Briton declared.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TOLL-GATHERERS.

"YES, if the coach is attacked we will undoubtedly have a lively time," Talbot observed, "for, as this fellow is here playing the spy, he will be able to inform the gang just how many passengers there are in the hearse, and, by the by, come to think of it, I guess that was what the three shots were for. There are three of us in the coach, and probably this spy arranged with the gang to signal them a shot for each passenger."

"Yes, yes, very likely."

"But as we are onto the little game, we ought to be able to beat it. I will try to cross-examine the fellow while we are eating supper and see if I can't pump something out of him."

"That is a capital idea!"

"If he is in league with any road-agent band the chances are big that he will hurry his supper down and get away before the rest of us are ready to start in the coach. He has probably got a horse concealed somewhere near in the foot-hills, and by the aid of the animal he will be able to join the gang, so they will have ample time to get ready to receive us."

"Yes, yes, that will be the programme, undoubtedly."

"I will ride on the box with the driver and arrange a plan of action with him, and after we get well under way you warn the professor, although I am afraid that if it comes to a fight we will not be able to depend much upon him."

"Not in the least, my dear sir!" Broughton exclaimed. "I am satisfied of that. He has no more pluck than a hare, and although he has two revolvers, I am satisfied that at the first sign of danger he would become so frightened that they wouldn't be of any more use to him than a boy's pop-gun."

"Well, I guess you are about right, but since we are on our guard against an attack, with you inside the coach and I on the box, the fellows will have to bring a small army to keep us from whipping them."

"Yes, no doubt, and upon my word, Mr. Talbot, I had about as lief be killed outright as to submit to be robbed by these miserable wretches. I have already suffered all in that line that I care to undergo, and the experience is decidedly unpleasant, don't you know?"

"Of course, that goes without saying."

By this time the two had reached the shanty where the supper was served.

They had loitered behind the rest in order to exchange these few words, and when they took seats at the table they found that the others were about half through the meal.

"How may I call your name, partner?" Talbot asked, addressing the prospector.

The other scowled a bit, as though he did not like the question, and then replied in a rather sulky way:

"My name is Thomas—Jim Thomas."

"You are not from No Man's Camp?"

"How do you know that?" responded the man in a decidedly uncivil way.

"How does a man know anything?" Talbot responded. "I am a resident of the camp, and if you belonged there I would be sure to know you, and I do not."

"I'm from Tombstone," replied the other, shortly.

"That may be; anyway, I knew you were a stranger in these parts, and I say, it seems very queer to me that a Tombstone man should take it into his head to prospect down in this region, so far away from home. Why didn't you try your luck in the country around Tombstone? That is a far better region than this, and a man is much more likely to strike a good thing up there than down here."

"Oh, I don't know about that," the fellow answered, evidently not relishing the turn the conversation was taking.

"I had a pard who put me onto a good thing up in this deestrick. I hain't been able to run across it yet, but I don't doubt I will afore long."

"Another ghost-story!" exclaimed the driver in a decidedly incredulous way. "The woods are full of 'em!"

By this time Jim Thomas had bolted his supper and rose from the table.

"I have got jest 'bout time to take another leetle tramp afore dark," he said. "So-long, pards, see you ag'in!" And then he hurried away.

The Englishman and Talbot exchanged looks,

the Briton considerably surprised that the sport's prediction was so speedily fulfilled.

In another twenty minutes, all were through with the repast and began to prepare to resume the journey.

"Sandy, I reckon I will ride on the box with you for the rest of the way," Talbot remarked just as they were ready to start.

"All right, glad to have you," responded the knight of the whip.

The sport ascended to the box, the driver cracked his whip and away they went.

The shades of night were now rapidly thickening, but as the moon was already rising—a great round ball of fire—it was plain that the darkness would not trouble the travelers much.

"What is the news, by the way, from the camp?" Talbot asked of the driver, after the coach got well under way.

"Waal, you'll have to give that conundrum to somebody else," Sandy replied, "'cos I must give it up. You see, I have been off the route for 'bout a month now—been 'tending to a leetle business over to Tombstone."

"You have been on this route for some time I believe?"

"Yes, over a year."

"Ever been troubled much by road-agents?"

"No, the galoots ain't bothered us to speak of; twice, I believe, in the last year a stage has been held up, but you see the men who do the riding on this route are a pretty tough lot, and darned sight more likely to be heeled with weapons than with ducats, and the boyees who do this road-agent act are after soft things as a rule, and they don't like to hold up a hearse when they will be a sight more likely to git a fight than anything else."

"Suppose you anticipated a road-agent attack somewhere between here and No Man's Camp, what point would be the most likely one for the fellows to make the jump?"

The driver cast a glance full of wonder at the sport. He knew Dick Talbot well enough to understand that this was no idle question, put for sport, but that his passenger "meant business" every time.

"Say, what on earth are you giving me?" he exclaimed.

"The straight tip, old man, and don't you forget it," replied the sport, using the slang of the day.

"Is that so now?"

"I reckon you will find it so before you are three hours older."

"Waal, lemme see," and the driver reflected over the matter for a few minutes.

"Bout a mile on thar's a bit of country with little clumps of trees and bushes scattered all over it; it is 'bout the only spot 'tween hyer and the camp where road-agents would have a chance to git in any fine work."

"I see, these bushes and trees that you speak of afford good cover."

"Yes, that is the p'int."

"Well, now, I think there is a big chance of our being attacked to-night," and then the sport explained to the driver why he had reason to hold that opinion.

Sandy was a shrewd fellow and he was struck with the force of Talbot's reasoning.

"I reckon you have hit the bull's-eye right plumb in the center this time," he remarked.

"I didn't take no stock in this Jim Thomas from the first, but then I wasn't sharp enuff to see what he was up to. I took him for a blamed idiot."

"More knave than fool, I guess," Talbot remarked.

"I would go a pile of ducats onto that now I have got my eyes opened," the driver coincided.

"Well, how are you on this racket?" the sport asked. "Some drivers don't care to chip in in a game of this kind, their argument being that they are engaged to drive and not to fight."

"That is good sound sense, of course, but I ain't one of that kind of drivers," Sandy answered, with slow deliberation, as though he was weighing the matter carefully in his mind.

"No, siree, that ain't the way I look at it. When I hire out to a boss I calculate to work for him jest as I would like a man to work for me, and in the case of road-agents jumping a stage if I saw a chance for a fight, with any show to come out ahead, it is dollars to cents that I would wade in."

"I think the chances are that we can whale these fellows if they try to go for us to-night," Talbot remarked.

"In the first place, they will not take us by surprise, for we will be prepared for them, and it is by jumping out suddenly and taking the passengers at a disadvantage that the fellows are able to work their game."

"That is so!" the driver assented. "Will the pilgrims inside stand up to the rack, do ye s'pose?"

"The Englishman will, and I have already posted him, so he is prepared for a fight; you take a man of his stamp, and he can be depended upon, every time, but the German will crawl-fish the moment the trouble begins, I think."

"Yes, I reckon so; mighty few Dutchmen

can be counted in when it comes to a free fight."

"Now I will be ready for the gang. I will have my revolvers out, ready for action, and the moment they make their appearance and yell for the coach to pull up, instead of doing so put the gad on the horses, and I will open fire."

"That will be kinder a surprise party on them."

"Yes, they will be apt to be demoralized unless they are far better fighters than the average men who take to the road."

"Oh, it will work!" exclaimed the driver, in a tone of conviction. "You kin bet high on to it!"

"Are we near the spot?"

"Yes, 'bout half a mile more."

"Pull up a moment until I can post the Englishman so he will be ready for battle."

The driver complied with the request, and Talbot dismounted and explained to Broughton that within the next ten minutes the attack was likely to be made.

The professor immediately became the prey to extreme fright, and piteously pleaded with his companions not to provoke "dose bad mans" by offering resistance.

But the others would not listen, and Talbot advised him to lie down in the bottom of the coach, so as to be out of danger, and the German flopped down immediately.

Talbot resumed his seat, and the stage went on.

It entered the broken country where the timber abounded.

The moon, now well up, afforded plenty of light.

Suddenly, out from a clump of trees darted half a dozen men, right in the trail, and a hoarse shout rung out on the air:

"Halt yer hearse and hands up!"

The attack had come.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LIVELY SKIRMISH.

THE road-agents were all in a bunch in the middle of the trail, about fifty feet from the coach.

Each and every man was disguised by a black mask, and flourished a revolver.

Of course in an affair of this kind it is the proper thing for the driver to pull up his steeds and bring the coach to an immediate halt when summoned in an abrupt manner by the "toll-gatherers."

Even when the passengers are disposed to show fight, the driver will not attempt to proceed when thus peremptorily called upon to halt.

Therefore the action of the driver on this occasion took the road-agents completely by surprise.

The coach was going on at a good rate when the outlaws appeared, and the moment they sprung into sight, Sandy Boggs, being all prepared, cracked his whip over the heads of his steeds and yelled at the top of his voice in a way that would have done credit to a Comanche brave.

On went the steeds at a jump, quickly responsive to the encouragement, and at the same moment Talbot opened fire from both of his revolvers upon the road-agents huddled in the trail.

Never was a band of marauders more surprised.

Such a reception as this not one of them anticipated.

Talbot's fire was a deadly one, and three men were down almost before the road-agents comprehended what had happened.

There were three or four shots fired at random; so discomfited were the outlaws by this unexpectedly warm reception that they did not even take aim; and then the three unhurt road-agents fled as though they thought that Old Nick himself was at their heels.

"Pull up, pull up as soon as possible!" Talbot cried to the driver.

Sandy, who as a whip possessed rare talent, obeyed the injunction, and despite the speed at which the horses had been going, succeeded in bringing them to a standstill at the precise spot where the road-agents had made their appearance.

Down from the box leaped Talbot, and the Englishman also made his appearance from the interior of the coach, revolver in hand, eager to get a shot at the outlaws.

But the fellows were running for dear life, and the nature of the ground favored their escape, for after they had gained the shelter of the bushes it was a hard matter to decide which way they went, particularly as they separated and each man took a different course, on the principle of each man for himself and Satan take the hindmost.

The Englishman's "sporting blood" was up though and he was anxious to get a crack at the scoundrels, so he blazed away in the direction that the road-agents had taken, firing a half-dozen shots as rapidly as he could discharge the weapon.

Talbot and the stage-driver laughed at the fiery zeal of the Englishman.

"Go it, ye cripples!" Sandy cried. "This hyer is as nice a picnic as I ever struck!"

"The infernal blackguards!" cried the Briton, in wild excitement. "I would give a small fortune to be able to wing one of them!"

"Not much chance of that," Talbot observed.

"This broken country gives them a chance to escape and renders pursuit difficult."

"You bet!" exclaimed the driver. "It would be a mighty smart red-skin even w'ot could track a man among that 'ar brush. But they ar' whipped—whipped right out o' tha'r boots. I never see'd a gang cleaned out so neatly since I was hatched."

"Yes; their defeat is complete, and I reckon it will be quite a while before any more road-agent business is tried on this line," the sport observed.

"The proprietors ought to give you a vote of thanks with a bang-up dinner or something of that sort," suggested the driver.

"Oh, yes; from what I have seen of the stage-coach owners I should say they are just the kind of fellows to throw away their ducats in that fashion," Talbot observed, dryly.

A groan from one of the men who had fallen in the fight interrupted the conversation at this point and called the attention of the passengers to him.

"Let us see how these unfortunate wretches are," suggested the sport.

"From the way they went down I have an idea that one or two of them will never be of any use in this world to themselves or anybody else," Talbot continued.

"It is really a dreadful thing to be obliged to kill these fellows," the Englishman observed.

"But then I presume they would not have hesitated to murder us in cold blood if we attempted to resist the attack and had not been fortunate enough to beat them off."

"Oh, yes; these road-agents show no mercy. They go on the old highwayman plan—your money or your life."

As Talbot had expected, two of the outlaws had been killed outright, but the third, although apparently badly wounded, was still alive.

He was a rough-looking fellow—a man of forty or thereabouts, and in his agony had torn the mask from his face, exposing his features.

He lay on his back with his face upturned, and as Talbot and the Englishman paused at his side he fixed his eyes upon them.

There was a glassy look in his orbs, and the observers felt sure that he was not long for this world.

"Waal, pards, you socked it to me good," he said as he looked at the pair.

"Are you badly hurt?"

"I reckon I am; as I heered a cuss say on the stage of a the-ater one night, 'tain't as deep as a well nor as wide as a church-door, but it is enuff."

"Well, I am sorry for you, old man," Talbot remarked, and the sport meant it, every word, for now that the fight was ended, he regretted that he had been obliged to injure a fellow-being, although he had acted strictly in self-defense.

"Oh, that is all right. I would have plugged you in a min'te if you hadn't been too quick for me," the fellow replied, honestly.

"I went in for to play the game and I ain't got no right to complain if the keerds went ag'in' me."

"Perhaps I can do something for you. I have had a good deal of experience in such matters, and am about as good as the average doctor," Talbot remarked.

"Tain't no use, pard, I have got it hyer right in the chest and I know I'm a gone coon," the man replied.

"I am a mite easier now than I was awhile ago, but when I furst got it, I suffered jest as the preacher men say the poor cusses do down in the den of blazes."

"Perhaps your wound is not so severe as you think. I will take a look, anyway; it will not do any harm," Talbot observed.

Then, kneeling by the side of the wounded man, he opened the dirty flannel shirt which covered the broad and muscular breast of the sufferer.

From the circumstance that there was very little blood on the shirt, Talbot was under the impression that the man was not injured as badly as he imagined.

But when he came to examine the wound, a serious expression came into his eyes; he had seen such wounds before. The bullet had penetrated a vital part; the man was bleeding internally, and the most skillful doctor in the world could not hope to do anything for him.

"Waal, pard, I reckon I'm right, ain't I?" the fellow asked, finding that Talbot did not speak.

"Yes, I will not attempt to conceal the truth from you. In my judgment your wound is mortal."

"And I hain't got long to live either, hey?"

"Well, as to that, I am not skillful enough to say, but I should guess that your time is short."

"Yes, I'm sart'in of it; that is the reason why

the pain ain't so great; I will cash in my checks mighty soon."

"I am afraid so."

"Say, pard, I don't hold it ag'in' you that you downed me," the man observed. "It was done in a fair fight, and if luck hadn't been ag'in' our gang you would have been lying hyer in stead of me."

"Yes, that is likely."

"Oh, you bet! we had it in for you."

"For me?" asked Talbot, rather astonished at this statement.

"Yes, if you air Dick Talbot."

"That is my name," responded the sport still more astonished by this, for the man was an utter stranger, and he could not understand how it was that he was known to him.

"Say, sport, you look like a good, square man."

"Well, I hope I am."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"Yes, if I can."

"I've got a woman and kid in Tombstone. I ain't never done much for either of 'em for a long time—made 'em paddle their own canoe, but I reckon now I kin help 'em along a leetle. I've got a money-belt on and over a hundred dollars into it, and arter I pass in my checks I want you to take that 'ar belt and carry the money to my old woman and kid in Tombstone."

And here the man paused, his strength exhausted by the long speech.

"I will do it, and as I keep faith with you may the Lord keep faith with me hereafter!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Oh, I'll trust yer; you've got the right kind of a face, and I reckon you wouldn't go back on a miserable sinner like me."

"I will not!"

"The woman is Sal Hopkins—wife of Big Bill Hopkins—that's me. Everybody in Tombstone knows her. She takes in washing—had to do it, or else she and the kid would have starved, 'cos I ain't done nothin' but drink and gamble and fight for a long while."

"The woman shall have the money and a couple of hundred more on top of it!" Talbot exclaimed, impulsively.

"You are white—cleantrough—give me your hand, pard."

The sport and the dying man pressed palms.

"Look out for yourself," murmured Hopkins, faintly. "Thar's a heap of rocks ahead! This wasn't no real road-agent business, but we stopped the stage on purpose to kill you!"

"To kill me?" exclaimed Talbot, amazed.

"Yes; we were hired to do it, six of us, a hundred and fifty apiece for the job. The man that put it up is now in No Man's Camp to clean yer out. Watch for him, pard, or he'll lift yer scalp, sure."

"Say, it's gitting awful dark—ain't it?"

And then, with a long-drawn sigh, the guilty soul of the desperado fled.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAYOR INTERFERES.

THE excitement that was created in the mining-camp by the intelligence that the Heather Bell property had been "jumped" had never been exceeded since No Man's Camp had a "local habitation and a name."

The town fairly went wild over the news.

It was so late when the raid was made that the miners who were uncereemoniously turned out by the attacking party had little opportunity to relate what had taken place until the morning, but then the news spread like wildfire.

One and all united in saying that it was the boldest thing of the kind that had ever been heard of, and what made the matter still more astounding was that it had happened without any warning being given.

As a rule, before such a high-handed measure is resorted to, there is a good deal of talk and some claim made that the party in possession of the mine had not as much right to the property as the men who were anxious to get hold of it.

On this occasion, though the blow had fallen without the slightest warning, as far as the miners who had been ejected from the property knew, the leader of the attack was a stranger to No Man's Camp, although there were some of the citizens of the town enrolled in the attacking force.

It was really a most mysterious affair, and the more the matter was discussed the more puzzled and exasperated the citizens became, for they argued that if strangers could come in, seize the Heather Bell property and hold it, no man's claim in the town would be safe.

There was some loud talk about the matter, and as a result a deputation of citizens waited upon Mayor White about seven o'clock and wanted to know what he was going to do about the matter.

The deputation found the mayor in his office with the town marshal, Sandy Jones, and half a dozen of the leading citizens of the town, busily engaged in discussing the subject.

Bulldog Bill Donovan was at the head of the deputation, and had been selected to do the talking.

When the deputation filed into the mayor's of-

tice, about all the able-bodied male citizens of the camp gathered in the street without.

Bulldog Bill explained to the mayor the errand upon which he had come.

To sum up his argument in a few words: the citizens believed that the seizure of the Heather Bell property was a wrong which ought to be righted, if it made every man in the town go on the war-path.

"You bet!" cried the mayor, in the most emphatic manner. "Why, gentlemen, it has fairly made my blood b'ile! Durn me if it ain't the biggest outrage that I ever heard of, and we will squar' the thing if it takes a leg! We were jest talking of raising a force, and if these galoots don't git out of that mine a durned sight quicker than they got into it, we will give 'em what Paddy gave the drum."

"That's the talk!" cried the marshal. "We will have 'em out of that property in double-quick time!"

"From what I kin hear, thar's a small army of them," White observed.

"Forty or fifty men, the boys allow," Bulldog Bill remarked, with a shake of the head, "and they say, too, that every cuss is armed to the teeth; so if they are on the fight, we will be sart'in to have the hottest kind of a skirmish."

The listeners looked at each other, and about all of them followed the example of the saloon-keeper and shook their heads.

They were old and experienced miners, men used to the wild life of the border, and they understood that to attempt to dislodge even a dozen well-armed men from a mining property was a task which would cost blood, and in such a fight the attackers would be lucky if they did not lose six or eight men.

"Oh, thar's no mistake 'bout that!" the mayor observed. "If the galoots show fight—and it is dollars to cents that they will—thar's a bloody time ahead!"

"But what gits me is how they came to go for the Heather Bell. It is a good mine enough, but no better than a dozen others, and thar's three or four properties in the camp much more valuable. Now, when the galoots went in to make so big a break, why in thunder did they pitch onto this particular mine?"

The others shook their heads; the riddle was too much for them.

"It is the biggest kind of a mystery," Sandy Jones, the marshal, observed.

"Mebbe the thing is run by some man who has got some kind of a claim onto the mine," suggested Bulldog Bill.

"Mebbe so," the mayor remarked. "It really looks as if thar must be something of that kind, or else the men would never have dared to take so bold an action. But then ag'in I don't see how it can be, for I sold the property to Donald Maxwell myself, and I know the title I passed to him was as good a one as kin be scared up in this deestrick."

"Mebbe Maxwell got mixed up in some way, and so give somebody a claim on the Heather Bell," the saloon-keeper observed.

"Well, we kin settle that matter as well as any court in the land!" Mayor White remarked with a flourish.

"We ain't lawyers of course, and we don't need to be to settle a question like this hyer. We will jest gird up our loins and b'ist out to the Heather Bell; if the man, or men, who have seized the property did it on some sort of a claim we will request them to explain the matter, and I reckon it will not take us long to decide whether this claim will hold water or not."

"No, I reckon not," Sandy Jones remarked. "We kin get at the truth a durned sight better than the lawyers. Them galoots are all on the skin; and any leetle simple question of this kind they jest mix all up."

"Well, now, you kin bet yer bottom dollar that no good squar' men like we air kin be mixed up!" Bulldog Bill asserted.

"We know what is what and no dust kin be thrown in our eyes!"

The crowd loudly expressed their approval of this sentiment, and then Mayor White announced that the "procession" would move on the Heather Bell property in ten minutes.

"Jest going to wait long enough to give you galoots time to arm yerselves!" he said in conclusion. "I want every man in No Man's Camp who is able to pull a trigger to go for his we'pons, and if these cusses who have jumped the man ain't able to show that they had a mighty good reason for the action, we will make 'em git out or else we will fit 'em for pine boxes!"

The bystanders loudly applauded the sentiment.

"In ten minutes, gen'lemen: skoot!"

The crowd hurried forth, and the news of Mayor White's decision spread with wonderful rapidity.

And when at the expiration of the ten minutes he came forth from his office, he found about all the able-bodied men in the town assembled, ready for the expedition.

Fully fifty men had gathered, all armed, and upon each face sat grim determination.

The mayor thought proper to make a brief speech.

"Gen'lemen, I reckon you know what is up!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, yes," responded half a dozen voices.

"Thar's been some pretty high-handed work, and we are going to take a part in the game, and I reckon we are going to start in with a full hand right at the beginning, and if we don't rake in the pot, it will be because this hyer camp is played out, and I reckon that ain't so."

"Nary time!" cried Bulldog Bill, and the crowd echoed the words.

"Come on then, fellow-citizens, and I reckon it will not take us long to straighten this matter out!" the mayor remarked as he started.

The official led the advance, close behind him came Bulldog Bill and Sandy Jones, and the miners marched along in the rear.

There was a deal of speculation indulged in during the march by the miners as to whether the men who had seized the mine would dare to attempt to resist when they saw the magnitude of the attacking force, and it was the general opinion that they would.

As one old gray-bearded miner observed:

"Them fellers didn't go for to start in onto this thing without counting all the chances, and you kin bet high that now that they have gobbled the mine they won't throw up their hand without a fight, and if so be that thar is thirty of 'em, as they say, we won't have no picnic in h'isting 'em out of the mine."

And that the men in possession of the property were fully prepared to defend their position was apparent when the citizens came in sight of the mine.

Armed men were posted at every spot of vantage, all in readiness to repel an attack, and when the mayor in the advance came within a couple of hundred yards the fellows began to handle their weapons in such a menacing way that White judged it wise to call a halt.

"We want to have a leetle talk afore we go in for a fight," he remarked. "No need of being in a hurry, for we have got all day before us, and it is only right to give the cusses a chance to explain."

The rest assented to this, and the mayor, with the remark that he would soon see what they had to say for themselves, produced a handkerchief, and waving it in the air for a flag of truce advanced toward the mine.

A hundred paces on he halted, and as he did so a man came from the gate of the mine and walked toward the mayor.

The citizens watched the man for a moment, and then a hum of astonishment rose on the air, for in the new-comer they recognized an old acquaintance.

"What!" cried the mayor, in a loud tone, so that all could plainly hear him; "kin I believe my eyes? Is that you, MacGregor, or your ghost?"

It was the ex-marshal of No Man's Camp who had made his appearance thus unexpectedly, exciting the astonishment of the lookers-on.

"Well, mayor, I reckon I am good, honest flesh and blood, as far as I know," Black Mac responded. "I haven't passed in my checks yet, and will not play ghost for awhile."

"Well, I am glad to see you, old man!" and the mayor and MacGregor shook hands. "You are quite a stranger; I am glad to have you come back to your old stamping-ground, although you have taken us all by surprise. But I say, are you in command of this hyer party?"

"Yes; these men are pards of mine come to help me take possession of this mine, which I claim as my property," Black Mac replied, firmly.

CHAPTER XX.

BLACK MAC EXPLAINS.

GREAT was the astonishment excited by the announcement of the ex-marshal, and the members of the crowd looked at each other in wonder.

"Say, I reckon I don't exactly understand this hyer," the mayor remarked, an expression of profound amazement upon his face. "Do you mean to say that you claim this hyer mine?"

"That is my platform!" Black Mac replied, in the most decided manner.

"Well, but I don't understand how that kin be."

"You will understand all right when I explain the matter to you," the other replied. "My claim is a good one, and I reckon you will allow that it is so when you come to hear the particulars."

"Oh, yes, I shouldn't be surprised," the official rejoined. "You allers had the reputation of being a level-headed man, and I reckon you wouldn't go into nothing of this kind without being sure that you had good ground to go on."

"That is my little game always. Be sure you are right, then go ahead, and that is the motto I believe in."

"Well, Mac, your appearance is a surprise to the town. We haven't heard from you in so long that we almost came to the conclusion you had either passed in your checks or else got out of this section of the country altogether."

"No, I have been in Tombstone all the time,

but things did not work exactly right with me or else I would have been back here a long time ago. But I say, White, you have a pretty strong party at your back."

And the ex-marshal nodded toward the crowd who were watching the progress of the interview with the greatest attention.

"Yes, 'bout every man in the camp is to the fore," the mayor remarked.

"You see the report of the jumping of the Heather Bell claim stirred the town up to the wildest pitch of excitement. Nobody knew that you had a hand in it, and the impression was general that some outside parties had seized the property, and you know the camp of old, of course; such a trick would stir the boys up and we came to look into the matter."

"Very natural under the circumstances," MacGregor observed. "But I reckon I can explain matters so the camp will be satisfied that I have good reason for all I have done."

"Oh, I haven't any doubt in regard to that, now that I know you are in command of this party of jumpers."

"And I am ready to justify my course at any time!" Black Mac declared.

"Well, I s'pose you had better spit out what you have to say as soon as you kin."

"All right; I am ready to do it now, and as the citizens of the camp are all assembled, I could not have a better opportunity to present my case, but, under the circumstances, I think I ought to require that if my explanation is not satisfactory to you and the rest, I shall be allowed to return to the mine. You see, I am really putting myself into your hands, and there isn't any reason why I should do that, for I am in possession of the property with a well-armed force to back my quarrel, and if I did not choose to put myself in your power it would take a right smart fight to get me."

"Of course, no doubt about that!" the mayor exclaimed. "I appreciate the situation, I assure you, and I am the last man in the world to wish to take any unfair advantage. What you ask is reasonable, and so I freely agree to it."

"Go ahead, then, and I reckon it will only take a few minutes to show the men of this camp that I have a better claim to this mine than anybody else."

"You shall have every chance in the world to prove it."

And then the two men proceeded to where the citizens of No Man's Camp were anxiously watching the conference.

All were on the alert when the two drew near and halted, and listened with the utmost attention to the mayor when he began to explain the situation.

"Gentlemen, I reckon thar isn't many of you hyer who are not acquainted with our friend, MacGregor, who used to be marshal of this hyer camp."

Two-thirds of the miners nodded assent; these were the old citizens who knew the man well; the others were new-comers who had made their advent in the town since the time when Black Mac held sway, but as nearly all had heard of him, for tales of MacGregor's prowess were still current in the town, he did not seem like a stranger to them.

"Our old pard hyer is the man who has jumped the Heather Bell claim, but he says he has a good reason for what he has done, and so I told him that as we had come for the express purpose of looking into the matter, it would afford him a first-rate chance to set himself right."

"I told him, fellow-citizens, that we were arter justice and did not want anything else, and in order to give him a fair shake in this hyer thing, I agreed that arter he got through with his explanation he should be at liberty to go back to the mine, no matter what decision we came to."

The miners looked at each other, as though every man was desirous of learning his neighbor's opinion before he committed himself, and it was apparent from the expression upon their faces that they considered this agreement to be perfectly fair.

Bulldog Bill, from long experience quick to discover which way the tide of popular sentiment was moving, took it upon himself to act as spokesman.

"I reckon, Mister Mayor, that you have done about the squar' thing," he remarked, with the air of a sage.

"If I know this hyer crowd, and I reckon I do as well as any man you kin scare up in the town," he continued, "justice is all that is wanted, and we air ready to give Black Mac the squarest kind of a deal."

"Yes, yes," murmured half a dozen voices.

"Well, gentlemen, all I ask is a fair show for my money," the ex-marshal remarked. "I suppose I have acted a leetle hastily in jumping this mine, but I claim to have a better right to it than anybody else, and my experience in this world has been that if a man don't look out for himself, no one else will be apt to do it for him."

There was a general hum of approval, led by Bulldog Bill, at this sentiment, and the saloon-keeper seized upon the opportunity to remark

that if a man did not look out for himself he would be pretty certain to "get badly left."

"Of course, MacGregor, it is of no use for any one to attempt to tell an old rounder like yourself anything about this camp," Mayor White observed. "The man does not live who knows the town any better than you do."

"You know the gait we generally travel. We don't kee much for law, but we go our pile every time for justice. Go ahead and state how it is that you come to claim this property and I reckon we kin git at the rights of the matter as well as any court in the land."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed some of the miners, while the rest nodded their heads.

All had perfect confidence in their own judgment, and a supreme contempt for lawyers and judges.

This doubtless arose from the fact that quite a number of these denizens of No Man's Camp had during the past some unpleasant experiences connected with the administration of justice in the "effete East."

"No rogue e'er felt the halter draw,
With good opinion of the law."

"Well, gentlemen, it will not take me long to define my position," Black Mac remarked.

"You gentlemen who are posted in regard to the property know that this Heather Bell Mine was owned by Donald Maxwell, who was killed about a year ago, assassinated in the streets of this town by some secret foe who was never discovered. After his death the mine came into the possession of his sister, Miss Diantha Maxwell, she being Donald's only heir, and after awhile she married a man who calls himself Richard Talbot, a stranger, whom no one knows anything about; a man who made his appearance in the town on the night that Maxwell was killed, and under such circumstances that he was accused of the murder."

"But we couldn't fasten it on him, and so had to let him go," observed Mayor White at this point, and he spoke in such a way as to give the impression that in his own mind there was not much doubt in regard to Dick Talbot's guilt.

"The management of the property has fallen into the hands of this Talbot, and he acts as if he owns the concern, but he don't," Black Mac continued.

"Now my claim is this: just before Donald Maxwell was killed I loaned him twenty thousand dollars, and took a bill of sale of the mine as security, but not anticipating that there would be any need for me to have the document at hand, as it was agreed between Maxwell and myself that he should have a year to pay the loan, I sent the paper off to Tombstone to my lawyer for safe-keeping. That party started for a trip to Europe just about that time and only returned a few days ago, therefore until he came back I couldn't get the document, and that is why I have not put in my claim to the property before."

"Got that 'ar paper with you now?" the mayor asked.

"Yes; here it is, and with the signatures of two witnesses attached," Black Mac responded, producing the document and handing it to Mayor White.

The official examined it carefully and the rest looked on with the greatest interest.

"Hyer's Donald Maxwell's signature, sure enough!" the mayor declared. "I have seen him write it many a time, and I reckon I would know it anywhar, and the witnesses are Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy."

These two men were in the crowd, and upon hearing their names at once stepped forward.

Quickly they identified their signatures, and both remembered being called upon by Maxwell to witness his signing the paper, but, as they stated, they had not any idea of what the document was.

"That was quite natural," the official remarked. "Maxwell was no fool, and he did not want his private affairs known all over the camp."

"I jumped the mine because I expected to find this Dick Talbot here, and I knew he would not give up the property without a fight, no matter how good my claim was," Black Mac said.

"I reckon you have sized him up about right from what I know of him," the mayor observed.

"Diantha, though, is the soul of honor, like her brother, and when I explained how things were to her she admitted that my claim to the property was good and said she would not attempt to contest it."

"I was willing to do the square thing by her, seeing that she was not disposed to make trouble, so she accepted five hundred dollars and started for Tombstone where she has friends."

"Here's her receipt for the five hundred and a letter to you, Mr. Mayor, explaining her action."

White examined these papers with the same care which he had bestowed upon the bill of sale.

"These are all right and regular," he remarked, with the gravity of a judge. "Thar

ain't no flaw into them as far as I kin see. I know the lady's handwrite as well as I do my own, and so kin sw'ar to it."

"Well, fellow-citizens, you have my statement now," the ex-marshal observed, "and all that remains is for you to decide whether I am in the right or wrong in seizing upon the Heather Bell property. I am not afraid to trust my case in your hands, for I know that you are all square men and will do me justice."

Black Mac spoke confidently; and in this he was justified by the expression visible upon the faces of the miners.

They had come forth prepared to give battle to the death with the men who had seized the mine, but now that they knew why the attack had been made they were not at all eager to be mixed up in the affair.

In fact, according to the evidence presented by the ex-marshal he had by far the best right to the property in their opinion.

The miners held a brief consultation, and then Bulldog Bill, as their spokesman, announced it was the opinion of the citizens that they had no call to interfere in the matter.

Black Mac thanked them for the decision and invited the crowd to take "something" with him, so back to the camp they all went.

The ex-marshal had won another point in the game.

CHAPTER XXI.

PREPARING FOR AN ATTACK.

AFTER treating the miners to the best that Bulldog Bill's saloon afforded, Black Mac accompanied the mayor to his office, and they were soon joined there by the owner of the Little Brown Jug Saloon.

The three conspirators were in high glee over the success of their scheme.

"It worked to a charm!" Mayor White exclaimed.

"You kin bet yer life on it!" cried Bulldog Bill, emphatically.

"I am not surprised, for that was my calculation when I planned the trick," the ex-marshal observed.

"Thar's no denying that you arranged the thing to the queen's taste," the official observed, "but I reckon you would not have been able to carry the scheme through with so little trouble if this Dick Talbot had been in town, for he is on the fight bigger'n a wolf."

"Oh, there is no doubt in regard to that," Black Mac admitted. "It was my game, of course, to take advantage of his absence. I reasoned that sooner or later something would happen to take him out of the town, and I had made up my mind to jump the mine as soon after his departure as possible."

"There will be blazes to pay when he comes back and hears what has occurred," the mayor suggested.

"I should not be surprised," Black Mac replied.

"Oh, yes, this hyer Talbot has got the sand to make the biggest kind of a fight," Bulldog Bill remarked.

"When he comes back," the ex-marshal observed, in such a peculiar way that the attention of his companions was instantly attracted.

"Oho, do you reckon that thar is a doubt 'bout his coming back?" Mayor White interrogated.

"He will not return to No Man's Camp if some pards of mine succeed in a little game that they have on foot."

"That is a big idee!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed, admiringly.

"Do you mean to say that you have a party out to waylay him?" the official demanded.

"Oh, no, I am not giving myself away in that fashion at all. All I say is that some pards of mine have put up a little job, and if the game succeeds, Dick Talbot will not return to No Man's Camp."

"Yes, yes; but I say, Mac, there isn't any need of beating about the bush with your old pards," the mayor remarked.

"A man never loses anything in this world by acting cautiously," Black Mac retorted. "And besides, what is the use of going into details as long as I give you a hint in regard to the result?"

"This Talbot is a good man, you know," suggested White.

"Oh, yes, no one knows that any better than I do," the other replied, with a grimace. "I have felt his power and understand that when a man tackles Dick Talbot he is embarking in a difficult and dangerous enterprise."

"Well, what I was going to say was, suppose that this little plan of your pards' fails—suppose they are not able to prevent Talbot from returning to No Man's Camp—have you calculated upon that?"

"If I had not taken that chance into consideration, it would have shown that I was a mighty poor schemer," the ex-marshal replied.

"Oh, you kin trust Black Mac to look out for all the chances!" Bulldog Bill declared.

"When such a man as this Dick Talbot is in question it is never safe to calculate upon his being wiped out in any ordinary fight. Men of

his stamp seem, cat-like, to possess a dozen lives."

"I think that he will not return to No Man's Camp, for it does not seem possible he can escape from the trap which has been laid for him, but as the old adage, 'It is the unexpected that always happens' sometimes is very true, I intend to take measures so that if he wants to come back to fight me I shall have so great an advantage that he will not be able to accomplish anything."

"Now you are talking solid chunks of wisdom," Mayor White remarked. "In all matters of this kind it is always best to be prepared for everything."

"I agree with you there," Black Mac replied, immediately, and Bulldog Bill shook his head in an owly kind of way.

"Now then, we will suppose for the sake of discussing the matter, that Dick Talbot escapes this trap which has been set for him and returns to No Man's Camp."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the official, following the line of argument with the greatest interest, as also did the saloon-keeper.

"When he comes back and discovers that I have seized the mine, what will he be apt to do?"

"Raise a gang and go in to clear you out!" the mayor exclaimed.

"You bet yer sweet life he will be jest the chap to try that leetle game!" Bulldog Bill asserted.

"No doubt that is the plan of operations which he will adopt, and, therefore, I must take measures to beat that game."

"Sart'in," the mayor observed.

"You kin go yer bottom dollar onto it," the saloon-keeper declared.

"Well, in cogitating over this matter I came to the conclusion that the best way to keep Talbot from raising an army to fight me would be to engage all the best men in the town to serve on my side, and that game I have carried out."

"Mighty cute idee!" cried the mayor.

"You bet it is!" added Bulldog Bill.

"I have secured twenty of the best men in the town, some of them are with me now and the others look to Leadville Mat, Bow-legged Billy and Johnny Sands, the Tiger of Tucson, for instructions."

"Yes, but twenty men don't use up all the warlike galoots in the camp," the mayor observed.

"I am aware of that, but it is about all I can handle at present," Black Mac replied. "And now what I want to know is how many more men can be scared up in the town—men who can be depended upon to hold up their end in a fight?"

"Let me see," the mayor remarked in a meditative way, "you say you have secured twenty men?"

"Yes."

"Through Leadville Mat, Bow-legged Billy and Johnny Sands."

"Yes, those three have been acting for me all along."

"Three of the toughest men in the town," the saloon-keeper observed.

"Right you are!" White exclaimed. "Well, I should say that anybody would have trouble to scare up more than fifteen more fighters, and then, as I reckon you have taken the pick of the camp, I don't believe they would stand up to the rack as they ought to if it came to a hot fight."

"That is about my calculation, but whether the men be good or bad I want to fix it so that Talbot will not be able to enlist their services if he tries to do so, and this, my dear Mister Mayor, is where you come in."

"How so?"

"You must pick up the rest of these men. You think there is going to be trouble, you know, on account of my seizing the Heather Bell property, and so in order to keep the peace you strengthen your police force."

"That is a big idee!" the saloon-keeper cried.

"Yes, it is a cute one," White observed, reflectively.

"And after you have got your men there will not be many left for Talbot."

"The only difficulty I can see about the matter is that some of the best men in the town will not be apt to come into an arrangement of this sort," White remarked. "Talbot has made a good many friends since he came into the camp, and there are galoots, I know, who might be willing to take my money, but would be certain to kick over the traces if Talbot makes his appearance and calls upon them for aid."

"No doubt, but men like that are few and far between in No Man's Camp, unless it has changed greatly since I knew it."

"We can afford to pay two dollars to each one; the prestige of success is with me, and the crowd always like to be on the winning side."

The other agreed in this opinion, and after a few more words the conversation ended.

MacGregor returned to his mine, the saloon-keeper to his ranch, while the mayor sought out Sandy Jones and instructed him to strengthen the police force.

The conspirators did not allow the grass to grow under their feet.

CHAPTER XXII.

TALBOT APPEARS.

THERE was need of haste, as the conspirators discovered, for when the northern coach halted at the door of the Metropolitan Hotel that evening, an hour or so late, the first man to emerge from it was Richard Talbot.

Behind him came the two gentlemen, the Englishman and the German, who had been his traveling companions.

The three plotters who were working against bold Injun Dick were not the only ones in the town who expected his arrival, and had spies on the watch, for the moment that Dick Talbot descended from the coach, a brawny middle-aged fellow, known locally as Old Man Mike Finnigan, and who held the position of bouncer in 'Frisco Nell's Golden Hairpin Saloon, stepped forward and addressed the new-comer.

"Glad to see you back ag'in, Mr. Talbot!" he exclaimed, and he extended his hand in the most friendly manner.

"Thank you, and I am glad to get back," Talbot responded, giving the hand of the other a hearty shake.

And while the handshake was going on the bouncer seized upon the opportunity to whisper rapidly to Talbot:

"Keep yer eyes peeled—thar's a heap of trouble ahead and a lot of galoots ready to go for you. 'Frisco Nell wants to see you in her saloon right away!"

So rapidly and adroitly was the speech delivered that although there were a dozen or more loungers in the neighborhood, all eager to hear what was said, none of them succeeded in catching the purport of the speech.

"All right," responded Talbot, quietly, his iron-like face never changing in the least; but he swept his keen eyes rapidly around, intent upon discovering if any foes threatened him at present.

No sign of danger could he see, although from the peculiar expressions of the faces of the miners as they stared at him he would have suspected, even if he had not been warned, that something was amiss.

"I am going to take a smile," Talbot remarked, to his companions. "I am thirsty after my long ride, and I think a glass of ale will go to the right spot. Will you join me?"

"Oh, yes; you can count me in, as you Americans says," the Englishman replied. "But, I say, you know, can you get any ale out in this country that is fit to drink? The most of it, as far as my experience goes, is beastly stuff."

"Ah, no, mine goot fr'en," exclaimed the professor. "Der peer vas not brewed dot vas beastly. Some peer is better dan odder peer, but it ish all goot."

"You will find that the Golden Hairpin ale is up to the mark," Talbot answered.

"Der Golden Hairpin peer!" cried the German, in astonishment. "In der name of all dot ish wonderful, v'at kind of peer is dot?"

"Oh, that is the name of the saloon, not the beer," Talbot explained.

"But come along, and you can soon see for yourselves whether the fluid is up to the mark or not; anyway you will have a chance to see the boss of the Golden Hairpin Saloon, and out in this region such a good-looking girl as you will find her to be is worth a long journey to see."

"Can it be possible that a good-looking young woman runs a saloon?" the Englishman inquired. "But still I ought not to be astonished at that, for I have seen so many strange sights since I came to this wild western country that I ought not to be amazed at anything."

"In my gountry many womans draws der peer," the professor observed.

"It is not common, but this is a land of strange sights," Talbot remarked. "And this Golden Hairpin is the leading saloon of the town, although it is run by a woman, and to use the miner's expression, 'Frisco Nell is a daisy.'"

"And . . . that her name?" the Englishman asked.

"Yes; that is her handle."

"Not her real name, of course."

"No, I presume not; but I never heard her called anything else, and out in this region it is not considered polite to betray any vulgar curiosity in regard to people's names. If a man says his name is Smith, Smith it is, unless he happens to possess some striking peculiarity which suggest to his fellow-citizens that a nick-name would improve his appearance; then it is immediately affixed to him, and it usually sticks tighter than a brother, too."

"Upon my word I never heard of such a thing!" exclaimed the Briton, who had not been long enough in the country to understand the peculiarities of American humor common to the wild West regions.

"The idea of any man's appearance being improved by adding something to his name!" he continued. "The thing is supremely ridiculous, don't you know?"

"Yes, it does seem rather odd, but this is a very strange country out here," Talbot rejoined.

"But come along, gentlemen, I will be your guide."

Talbot led the way to the Golden Hairpin Sa-

loon, which the party soon reached, as it was only a short distance from the hotel.

The saloon was like the average place of its kind located in a mining-camp, excepting that it was rather larger and fitted with more care than the majority of such "ranches."

'Frisco Nell, a queenly-looking, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl was behind the bar, seated in an arm-chair, with her eyes fixed upon the door when the party entered, as though she was on the watch for some one.

And the moment she beheld Talbot there came a sudden flash of fire from her dark eyes, and the sharp, who saw the gleam, understood that she was on the lookout for him.

Upon his companions she bestowed merely a passing glance, but she rose as soon as she caught sight of Talbot and sauntered out from behind the bar.

But if Talbot's companions produced no impression upon her she did on them, particularly on the Englishman.

The German, struck by the wild, strange beauty of the girl, whispered to his companions that she was a "fine young woomans," but the Briton, grasping Talbot by the arm, exclaimed in a hoarse whisper:

"Great heavens! that girl is no stranger to me!"

"Is it possible—have you met her before?" the sharp inquired.

"Yes, in London—I am sure of it, although I cannot remember exactly where or when for the life of me."

"That is strange," Talbot observed. "I had no idea that she was an English girl; she certainly does not look like one."

"That is very true, but she has changed greatly since the time I saw her."

"Have you not been deceived by some resemblance?" Talbot inquired, decidedly incredulous.

"Oh, no, I am positive I have met her somewhere, although I am not able to place her. It was years ago; she was much younger then. You see, Mr. Talbot, I led a pretty wild life at one time and have only sobered down during the last fifteen years."

"During the last fifteen years!" repeated the sport in amazement. "Why, do you mean to say that it is fifteen years since you have seen this lady?"

"Well, I should judge that it was nearer twenty."

"Oh, you must have made some mistake about this matter," Talbot observed. "You are making the girl out to be a woman well in years by talking about meeting her fifteen or twenty years ago, unless she was a mere slip of a child at the time."

"No, she was sixteen or seventeen then."

"There must be some mistake, for I don't think she is over twenty-two or three at the outside now," the sharp rejoined.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Talbot, you haven't had as much experience in these matters as I have!" the Englishman replied.

"Damsels of this kind are extremely expert in the art of remaining always young. I have known women of fifty who did not look a day over twenty-five."

Talbot shook his head incredulously.

"Oh, you may doubt, but I give you my word it is true!" the Briton insisted.

"These charming creatures are real artists, and display wonderful ability in using paint and powder to conceal the ravages of time."

"I am certain I have encountered this woman, although I cannot remember where, but it was in one of the London gin palaces, no doubt."

"You are deceived by some accidental resemblance, I think. Let me introduce you to the lady. Perhaps after you come to know her you may change your mind."

The Englishman shook his head; he was obstinate after the manner of his race.

The party advanced to the bar, at the end of which 'Frisco Nell was standing.

"Glad to see you back, Mr. Talbot," she said.

"Thank you, I am not sorry to find myself again in the camp, I assure you," the sharp replied.

"Allow me to introduce two friends of mine, gentlemen tourists engaged in seeing the wonders of the wild West. Mr. Broughton, of London, England and Professor Poppenheim, of Germany, Miss Nell, the proprietress of the Golden Hairpin."

"Really delighted to make your acquaintance," the Englishman said, closely scrutinizing the girl.

"Dat is true, all der while," added the professor, with an elaborate bow.

"I am pleased to meet any friends of Mr. Talbot's," responded the girl, in a careless way, taking no particular notice of the strangers, and so failing to perceive the peculiar way in which the Englishman was gazing at her.

And then she added, abruptly:

"Mr. Talbot, can I speak with you in private for a moment?"

"Certainly; will you excuse me, gentlemen?" The tourists bowed.

'Frisco Nell led the way to the rear of the saloon, where a small apartment was curtained off.

This was the paradise of the poker players, and a large square table with plenty of chairs afforded accommodation to the men who generally assembled about nine o'clock in the evening to woo the goddess, Fortune.

The curtain was half-drawn, and the pair, disappearing behind it, were concealed from the observation of those in the saloon.

"Sit down, Mr. Talbot, and prepare yourself to hear some dreadful news," 'Frisco Nell said, placing a chair for the sport.

He obeyed the injunction, and the girl also seated herself.

"Possibly though you have heard of what has taken place already?" she added.

"No, for I came straight to your place from the coach without talking with any one, but on the road I was warned that danger awaited me here."

"Yes, that is true enough, but a terrible blow has already been dealt you!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

'FRISCO NELL'S INFORMATION.

DICK TALBOT'S face grew hard and stern, for he realized from the way in which the girl spoke that what she had to say was of vast importance.

And he knew too that he could rely upon every word she said, for he felt certain that he had no better friend in the world than this strange girl who bore so odd a name.

"Go ahead, Nell; I am an old adventurer and always prepared for the worst."

"A single name will probably prepare you for what is to come," the girl observed.

"I reckon I can guess the name before you speak it. It is Black Mac."

"You are right."

"I have been expecting to hear from him, but it is so long since I had my fight with this man and forced him to leave No Man's Camp that I had come to the conclusion he got all he wanted of me and did not care to measure strength a second time with one who succeeded in beating him so easily on the first trial."

"Yes, that was my idea, too," the girl remarked.

"But from what I knew of the man I might have understood he would never be satisfied to rest content until he had made another attempt to get the best of you."

"It is a year now since you drove him from the camp, and he has waited all this time so as to catch you unawares. Your absence from the town gave him the opportunity he sought, and he was quick to improve it."

"Your news does not astonish me, for, as I told you, I was warned on the road that there was trouble ahead for me."

And then Talbot related the particulars of his encounter with the road-agents.

"Yes, yes; I can see that this black-hearted scoundrel has arranged his plans with fiend-like skill, and, Mr. Talbot, taking advantage of your absence, he has struck you a terrible blow."

And then 'Frisco Nell proceeded to relate what had occurred.

Talbot listened attentively, his face stern and impassible, but as the recital drew near an end an angry light shone in his eyes and the stern lines around his mouth deepened.

The story finished, Dick Talbot sat for a few moments in deep meditation with his eyes fixed upon the ground.

Then he raised his head and said:

"The attack upon and seizure of the Heather Bell property does not surprise me, for that is the course of action which any foe of mine would be apt to adopt; but in regard to my wife departing, leaving a letter to the effect that she gave up the fight, that is something that puzzles me."

The girl watched Talbot's face for a moment, and then exclaimed, in her abrupt way:

"Pardon the question, and do not think I ask it out of mere idle curiosity, but did you and your wife get along well together?"

"Oh, yes; as well as could be expected from two people so totally unlike as she and I were," Talbot replied, frankly. "She was a young, romantic girl, who had seen but little of the great world, while I was an old soldier of fortune, with a heart seared by the vicissitudes of a life of adventure."

"I was not exactly the kind of husband that she ought to have had, and yet we got on well together, although I am afraid I did not quite come up to her expectations—I was not the ideal husband that her imagination had pictured before we were married. If I had been a younger man, with more romance, I do not doubt I would have been better suited to her; but, as I said, we never had any trouble—not the slightest jar during our married life. I tried to make her happy, and she appeared to be, although you women are such deceptive creatures sometimes that it is hard to discover your real feelings."

"Yes, that is true," 'Frisco Nell admitted.

"Women often succeed in fooling men, but they are seldom able to deceive each other."

"Of course, I have not seen much of your wife during the past year, although when we met she was always friendly enough, but I did

not think that it was right for a woman situated as I am to seek for companionship with those of her own sex who had good husbands and good homes, but, as far as I have seen, your wife seemed to be perfectly satisfied and happy."

"Well, if she was not, she never complained, but still she was a proud girl and her pride might have caused her to appear satisfied even if she was not," Talbot observed.

"True, you might not have been the ideal husband which her fancy painted," Frisco Nell observed, "but then not one married woman out of a thousand can boast that her husband is; romance and reality are two very different things, you know."

"Yes, that is so; but even if Diantha was a little disappointed in my not being the ideal man she had expected, she was too honest, too true to desert me in this unaccountable way."

"There is some trick about it!" Frisco Nell declared, immediately. "I had a suspicion in regard to that the moment I heard of the matter! A woman would be base indeed to desert a man who had treated her well and with whom she had never had any trouble. That is the reason why I took the liberty to question you in regard to how you had got along together. If you had quarreled, and she was dissatisfied, then I could understand her acting in such a strange way."

"I cannot recall a single quarrel since we came together," Talbot observed. "We have had slight differences, of course; it would be pretty hard for two people so unlike as Diantha and myself to live together for a year and agree upon every point, but none of these ever amounted to anything."

"It is a trick, I tell you!" Frisco Nell exclaimed. "She has not gone away of her own free will."

"But how about this letter which you say she left for the mayor?"

"Another trick! See, Dick Talbot, do you believe that Donald Maxwell, just before his death, borrowed any twenty thousand dollars from Black Mac and gave a bill of sale of the mine as security?"

"No, indeed; in the first place, Maxwell had no use for any such sum of money, and Black Mac did not have it to lend if he did."

"He gets around that difficulty, I understand, by saying that the sum represents money lost to him by Maxwell at poker."

"That is something new, for Maxwell never had the reputation of being a desperate gamster."

"He was not, and the tale is all a lie from beginning to end! It is merely devised to account for the bill of sale."

"The paper is undoubtedly a forgery."

"And so is the letter to the mayor purporting to come from your wife."

"Yes, for in her right senses she would never have written any such missive."

"Both forgeries, of course, and Black Mac is just the man to be able to carry out such a trick, for he is an expert penman. I have seen him write, and know that he can handle the pen with the dexterity of a writing-master."

"What do you think has become of my wife?" Talbot asked, the stern lines around his mouth growing harder and harder.

"She has been carried away by this scoundrel and is now, probably, held in captivity by him somewhere."

"The fellow intends to make it a duel to the death, then, between us," Talbot remarked.

"Yes, and the struggle will be a desperate one, I assure you, for the moment I heard of Black Mac's reappearance I sent out my spies to learn what they could of his movements."

"You are a friend, indeed, Nell," Dick Talbot remarked, a grateful look in his dark eyes.

"Yes, and not a fair-weather one, either," the girl responded, promptly. "I cling as tightly to those I like when the tempest breaks as when it is all sunshine."

"That is the right kind of friendship."

"Yes, any other is only a bare counterfeit. Well, to come back to my mutton; my spies were instructed to find out exactly what Black Mac was doing."

"They were present when the mayor led the miners to the Heather Bell property and heard all that passed. Then they shadowed MacGregor after he came to the town and traced him to White's office, where he held a long conference with the mayor and Bulldog Bid, the man who runs the Little Brown Jug Saloon, you know, who was always one of Black Mac's warmest friends."

"Yes, I have heard of the man, but never met him, as he has been away from the camp since I have been in it."

"He returned a week or so ago. This interview between the three made me suspect that the mayor and Bulldog Bid were aiding Black Mac."

"Very likely, they are all of the same kidney; birds of a feather flock together."

"My spies kept their eyes and ears open and they soon discovered some important facts."

"MacGregor's force with which he holds possession of the mine, consists of about thirty

men; ten of them are strangers whom he brought with him, and the other twenty he picked up in the town."

"Thirty men, eh?" observed Talbot, with a grim smile. "Well, it is plain from the strength of the force that the fellow does not hold me lightly, and that he anticipates a desperate struggle, or else he would never have engaged so many men. I suppose, too, he has taken care to select the best fighters that the camp can boast."

"Yes, he has picked his men with great care, but this is not the worst bit of news that I have for you."

"Go ahead! I am prepared for anything now."

"After the conference between the three in the mayor's office ended, and MacGregor departed, Sandy Jones was summoned."

"The town marshal, eh?"

"Yes, and he was instructed to strengthen the police force in anticipation of trouble."

"Ah, yes, I reckon I see the game."

"And he set about enlisting all the men whom he could get to serve, paying five dollars a day."

"That is good wages as times go, and I suppose he snapped up about every man in the town who is worth his salt in the way of pulling a trigger," Talbot remarked.

"That was his intention, but he did not succeed, for as soon as I discovered his game I sent Billy out to engage what men he could for you, offering six dollars a day."

"Nell, you are a trump!" Talbot exclaimed, taking the girl's hand and pressing it warmly and gratefully.

"I did the best I could for you," Frisco Nell replied, coloring to her temples with pleasure as she felt the warm pressure of Dick Talbot's strong hand. "But I was only able to get five men, but the five are better than any other five in the town."

"How comes it that, though last in the field, you were able to secure good men?" Dick Talbot asked.

"Because these men are honest, hard-working miners, with nothing of the bully or ruffian about them, and they could not be bought by either Black Mac's or Mayor White's blood-money."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"But when my agents sounded them and found that there wasn't money enough in the camp to induce them to pull a trigger on the side which they believed to be in the wrong, my men had sense enough to come right out and say that they were wanted to help Dick Talbot fight the robbers who had seized upon his property."

"And they were willing then to enlist?"

"Yes."

"And only five men, eh, five honest men in all this camp—five out of a hundred? That is a small heaven to lighten the lump."

"Yes, but there are only about sixty men in the camp itself; the rest are outside and have not been reached by any one; these outsiders, you know, are mostly hard-working men who would not be apt to take part in a quarrel of this kind. Money would be no inducement to them."

"That is true enough; but how about the men who were working for me in the mine?"

"Four of the men of whom I speak were in the mine; the others have engaged with the marshal as extra police, but from what Billy says—I had him sound them—I judge that if you succeed in getting any force together, they will be apt to desert the marshal and come over to you."

"Five men is not much to start on, but it is a beginning, and now that I have commenced I swear I will not rest until I have driven out of this town all the scoundrels who have made the name of No Man's Camp the byword for all that is bad!"

Frisco Nell gazed at the speaker with eyes full of admiration, for the tone in which he spoke showed that his heart was in the good work.

"And I will do all I can to help you; woman though I am, perhaps I may be able to do as good service as a man."

They clasped hands, and the compact was made.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN COUNCIL.

"You think then there is a chance I may gain some recruits after I show that I am going to make a fight for the mine?"

"Oh, yes, I do not think there is a doubt about it," Frisco Nell replied. "All the men in the camp are not rascals; nearly all the newcomers are pretty decent fellows, and I am certain from what I have heard them say that they think it is not right for the camp to be ruled by a set of cut-throats. The miners in this region are rich, and it is argued that the camp would grow rapidly if it had not such a bad name."

"No doubt about it. The bad reputation of the town keeps the honest, hard-working men away, while it attracts scoundrels of all degrees," Dick Talbot remarked.

"It is no light task to 'purify' such a camp as this, and it is necessary for a goodly number of the citizens to be with me or else the job cannot be done."

"I feel certain that there are more good men in the place than bad now," Frisco Nell remarked, "but the trouble is that the good men keep in the background, and as each one of the scoundrels makes noise enough for a dozen, it seems at the first glance as if the bad men largely outnumbered the good, but I am satisfied it is not so. All that is wanted is a chosen band, headed by a good man, the nucleus around which the others may gather."

"I reckon you are about right, Nell," Talbot observed. "I have seen a few camps purified in my time, and it has always worked in about that way. When the Vigilantes got fairly started they seemed to gather strength as the school-boy's snowball, increasing in size by being rolled along."

"Ah, I wish I had some of my old pardes here to give me a helping hand," Talbot continued.

"If I had those staunch friends to aid me, who in the past have followed my lead so well, I would soon show this Black Mac and his confederates a trick or two which would be apt to make them open their eyes."

"If with the wish I could, with the magician's power, summon to my assistance, wily old Joe Bowers, the veteran, Mud Turtle, the brawny red chief, as faithful to his friends as the needle to the pole, and the bravest fighter that ever pulled a trigger, no matter what the color of the outer man, Dandy Jim, the famous Man-from-Red-Dog, the fellow with the courage of the bulldog, and last, though not least, the sly, almond-eyed son of the far East, the heathen in whom there is no guile, but who can give the Mexican man any number of points in scientific poker-playing, although it is a game which he 'does not understand.'"

"These four are all good fighters—the four worth fifty common men, and with a man about my size at their head, we would form a Cohort of Five powerful enough to run a town like No Man's Camp without any trouble."

"Cannot these men be found?" exclaimed Frisco Nell, wrought up to a high pitch of excitement by the inspiring words of Talbot.

"No, I fear not. Bowers I can get at, but the others are scattered through the wilds of the West, the most of them on the Pacific Slope, I reckon, and unless I possessed the wishing-ring of Aladdin or the seven-league boots of the German enchanter, it would not be possible for me to get the army together."

"You must do the best you can with what men you can raise in the town."

"Yes; I will not proceed to immediate action, but lay low and survey the state of the ground. My first action, in order to blind the eyes of this scoundrel of a mayor and make him believe that I have no suspicion he is in league with Black Mac, will be to call upon his Honor and ask his advice about the matter."

"Yes, that will be an excellent idea," Frisco Nell remarked. "It will be much better for him to believe that you do not suspect he is in the league against you than otherwise."

"I think so; and as far as I can see I shall have to make a waiting race of it; that will be my game undoubtedly. I cannot force matters, for it will not pay me to do so."

"Yes, yes; you are right, I think."

"Not a doubt of it! I must play the same game on this fellow which he so successfully played on me," Talbot remarked.

"He waited a year for a favorable opportunity before he struck his blow, and I now must wait and bide my time exactly as he did."

"The first thing for me to do is to strengthen my forces. The five men whom you have enlisted will do for a body-guard, but it would be a hopeless attempt for me, with so small a force, to try an attack on the mine. My game is to get Black Mac to come out from his intrenchments and fight me in the town."

"If I could get ten good men together, I would not be afraid to meet him and his twenty or thirty warriors in a street-fight, for in such a contest a large number is sometimes more of a disadvantage than a help, for they get in each other's way."

"Yes; I can understand that readily enough," the girl remarked.

"Every day will make me stronger and my opponent weaker, but the first step in the campaign is to prove to the town that I am in the right and Black Mac is in the wrong."

"But do you think that can be done?" Frisco Nell asked, doubtfully.

"Now you are asking a riddle which is not easily answered," Talbot replied. "But the attempt must be made; how it will turn out is something beyond man's wisdom."

"Yes; but it seems to me as if this scoundrel had planned his scheme so carefully that you will not be able to find a flaw in it," Frisco Nell remarked, in a reflective way.

"Of course, in my own mind, there is not a doubt that both of these papers which he has presented are forgeries, but I fear it will not be possible to prove that they are," she continued.

"Maxwell being in his grave could not deny

his signature," Talbot remarked, "but my wife can testify as to whether she wrote the letter ascribed to her or not, and it is only a question of time for me to find her."

"I think that Black Mac is scoundrel enough to commit almost any crime, but he would not wantonly commit murder, and therefore I feel sure Diantha is alive, and if she is, in time I will find her. I will put Bowers on the scent as soon as he arrives, and he will be here in a day or two, for at the last moment, just as I started in the coach from Apache City, he told me he had changed his mind about staying up in that region and would start for No Man's Camp in a day or two."

"Bowers is the fat fellow who looks so disreputable?" the girl remarked, evidently not impressed by the veteran's appearance.

"Yes, that is the man," Talbot answered. "His looks are certainly not in his favor, but like a singed cat, he is decidedly better than he appears. He is a smart, shrewd fellow, uncommonly cunning, and, at a pinch, can fight like a demon, although he does not make any pretension to being a warrior. He is a valuable man, and I have proved his worth in many a dangerous enterprise."

"The man's appearance then certainly aids him, for no one to look at him would judge he possessed any of the qualities for which you commend him," Frisco Nell observed.

"Yes, that is an advantage, and is one reason why he is sometimes able to do such good work, for from his appearance not one man out of a thousand would be apt to suspect him to be at all dangerous."

"It is an advantage truly."

"So, until Bowers's arrival, I will not be able to do much. Have Billy notify the men you have engaged to meet me to-night at twelve o'clock in the rear of the hotel corral. Tell them to come singly. 'I will say to them, 'It is a dark night,' and they will reply, 'Yes, but the moon will soon be up.' In this way I will know my men, and there will not be any danger of a stranger or a spy getting into the consultation."

"The idea is a good one."

"Yes, and the meeting will give me an opportunity to arrange with them in regard to a plan of action, for I want to put them on the trail so as to discover what has become of my wife, for I feel sure that she has not left me of her own accord: she has been carried off by this arch-scoundrel, and the moment I satisfy myself in regard to the matter, if he is guilty of the deed, then it is his life or mine, for the world will not be big enough to hold both of us."

The threat was quietly spoken, but on Talbot's face was a look which showed he meant every word.

CHAPTER XXV.

INTERVIEWING THE MAYOR.

THERE was a moment's pause, and then Talbot said:

"By the way, did you notice the English gentleman to whom I introduced you to-night?"

"Not particularly; why?"

"Because he thinks he is an old acquaintance of yours."

"Well, I do not remember him, and I usually have a good memory for faces, too."

"He seems quite positive about the matter."

"Oh, it may be possible," the girl replied, carelessly, as though she did not attach any importance to the circumstance.

"His recognition of you is rather strange, too, for he has the belief that it was not in this country he encountered you."

"He never saw me then, for I have never been in any other."

"The gentleman has got a very strange idea in his head," Dick Talbot remarked. "He thinks that he met you in London some fifteen or twenty years ago."

At first the girl looked annoyed, and then as the absurdity of the idea came to her she burst into a laugh.

"In the name of all that is wonderful, how old does the man take me to be?" she exclaimed.

"Well, he does not think you are any chicken," Talbot replied.

"No, I should say not if he talks about meeting me fifteen or twenty years ago."

"Yes, and he says that you appeared then to be just about as old as you are now."

"That is a compliment truly. Then I was not a child at the time?"

"No, a woman grown."

"The man has made a mistake and confounded me with some one else."

"That is what I told him, but with all the natural obstinacy of a Briton he protests that it is not so."

"It does not make any difference to me, of course, and I cannot help what the man thinks, but he is wrong, for I have never been out of this country, and I am not older than I appear to be. Women are reputed to be averse to disclosing their ages, but when they are as young as I am there is no reason why they should conceal the truth," Frisco Nell remarked.

"I don't see why they should care."

"How old do you think I am?" the girl asked,

fixing her brilliant eyes full upon the face of the sport.

And Dick Talbot, gazing intently upon the beautiful face of Frisco Nell, thought he had never looked upon a more lovely girl.

"Well, I am not sure that I am much of a judge of a woman's age, but I should think you are about twenty."

And as the sharp looked upon the lovely face, the words of the Englishman in regard to how skillful women were in concealing the ravages of time by means of paint and powder came to him, but as far as Frisco Nell was concerned he would have been willing to stake his life there had been neither paint nor powder used upon that fresh young face.

"You are a good judge and your guess is not far from the truth. I am exactly twenty-two."

"Twenty-two, eh? Well, I was not far out of the way."

"No, so you see it is not possible that your English acquaintance saw me in England fifteen or twenty years ago."

"Oh, I felt satisfied that he was mistaken, and he will probably be so after he has had a talk with you."

"What will be your first move in your game?" Frisco Nell asked.

"To call upon the mayor and ask his advice in the matter," Dick Talbot replied. "He will probably tell me he considers that Black Mac has put in a strong claim to the mine, and then I shall challenge him to have my adversary appear and confront me before the people of the town to-morrow."

"Do you think he will accept the dose?" Frisco Nell asked, as if she had a doubt in regard to the matter.

"Yes, I think so; if he does not it will look as if he was afraid to face me, and the public at large will reason that he does not feel so sure of the justice of his claim as he pretends."

"Very true; it is a wise movement, and while you are carrying it out I will have your men notified."

"Nell, I shall never forget your kindness," Dick Talbot observed as he rose to his feet.

"Oh, that is all right," the girl responded, also rising. "We are old pals, you know, and I shall always be glad to aid you all I can, for I know you would do the same for me."

"Most assuredly I would!" Talbot replied warmly.

Then the two passed into the main saloon and resumed their former positions.

This afforded the Englishman a chance to converse with Frisco Nell, and he was quick to improve the opportunity.

After a few commonplace remarks, Broughton mentioned that he thought he once had had the pleasure of meeting her in London, England's capital; the girl replied that he was not correct in his surmise, and after a few moments' conversation the Englishman, with all his obstinacy, was obliged to admit that he had made a mistake.

"I do not understand it at all," he said, sadly perplexed, to Dick Talbot after Frisco Nell had been called to another part of the room. "I would have been willing to have taken my oath that I had met the girl fully twenty years ago, but not since that time, for it was in my old life when I was a wild young man that she figured. I am wrong, though, and have been deceived by some strong resemblance, but my mind is a blank on the subject; I cannot recall the circumstances."

"You are satisfied, then, that she is not the one?"

"Oh, yes," the Englishman replied. "The woman to whom I refer would be about forty-five now, and this girl is not much over twenty."

"How about the paint and powder?" Talbot asked, banteringly.

"Oh, I was wrong about that as far as this girl is concerned," Broughton admitted. "She is young; there is no mistake about it. But what I said was the truth, though; I have known plenty of women who were able to disguise their age so that even a good judge would believe they were ten or fifteen years younger than they really were. But, I say, you look thoughtful."

The Englishman was a close observer and he noticed that there was a cloud upon Talbot's brow.

"Yes, I am in a peck of trouble," and then he described the situation.

The Englishman listened attentively; the professor had wandered away, having got into conversation with some miners, with the idea of discovering if any of them knew aught of the mysterious valley which he sought.

It was the German's habit to question almost everybody he encountered in regard to the matter, but although he came across quite a number of men who said they had "hearn tell of sich a place," none of them were able to locate it.

One man "reckoned" it was in Arizona, another said it was "somewhar" on the Pacific Slope, while a third declared it was down in Old Mexico; in short, no two of the men who acknowledged that they had heard of the place agreed in regard to the location.

A few had bluntly told this anxious seeker after knowledge that although they had heard the yarn they did not take the least stock in it, for they regarded the tale as a "ghost" story, and the professor was astonished to find that the secret of the valley was widely known.

It was the old tale; in the valley was a valuable gold deposit; "nuggets" by the score could be picked up, and all a man had to do was to find his way to the valley and his fortune was made.

This story had been communicated to the professor in Germany as a profound secret, and he had come clear across the seas on this wild-goose chase.

But notwithstanding the fact that the "yarn" was pronounced an improbable one by all the well-informed men he met, the German was not at all shaken in his belief, and continued to search for a clew to the valley as industriously as ever.

"Upon my word, you are right!" Broughton exclaimed, after reflecting upon Talbot's story for a few moments. "You are in a terrible mess."

"Yes, it is an ugly matter and I reckon there will be some blood shed before I get through with it."

"Mr. Talbot, if there is going to be a fight I trust you will give me a chance to 'wade in,' as you Americans say," the Englishman remarked.

"Yes, but I do not want to involve you in my trouble."

"Mr. Talbot, if I became involved in any difficulty, do you mean to say that you would not see me through it?" the Briton demanded.

"Well, I suppose I should feel as if I ought to," Talbot replied, with a smile, for he saw what the other was up to.

"Exactly; you would stick to me like a brother; you know you would; and, most assuredly, I shall do the same by you. My 'sporting blood' is up and I shall be delighted at the chance to participate in what you Americans term a free fight."

Actuated by a sudden impulse, Talbot extended his hand, and the Briton clasped it warmly.

Here was one good recruit gained!

"All right! If you want to come into the game, I will be glad of your aid!" the sharp exclaimed, and the way the sentence was uttered showed that the words came straight from his heart.

"I am going to see the mayor about this matter and shall be glad of your company."

"How about our friend, the professor?"

"We had better leave him at the hotel; he is not the kind of man to get mixed up in an affair like this."

"He is decidedly not warlike."

The German was called, and the three proceeded to the hotel, where accommodations were secured, and then, leaving the professor engaged in conversation with the landlord, Talbot and the Englishman sallied forth.

Straight to the store of Mayor White they proceeded; the clerk said the mayor was in his private apartment, and then conducted them into the presence of the official.

The mayor received Talbot with as much warmth as though he considered the sport to be the greatest friend he had in the world; shook hands in the most affable manner with the Englishman, when he was introduced by the sharp, and said what a pleasure it was for him to meet any friend of Mr. Talbot.

Then he placed chairs for the visitors and pressed them to be seated.

"I have come to talk to you about this Heather Bell business, Mr. Mayor," Talbot remarked.

"Yes, yes, a bad business!" White declared.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CHALLENGE.

"A VERY, very bad business," repeated the mayor, with a doleful shake of the head.

"Yes, so it seems to me."

"I am very sorry that it occurred in your absence, too."

"Yes; I am very sorry about that myself, for the chances are that if I had been here it would never have occurred at all," Talbot remarked, his tone full of meaning.

White understood him immediately.

"Well, I don't know," he observed, shaking his head, gravely. "MacGregor came to the camp fully prepared for war. He had a large force—about forty men, and although you, no doubt, would have made a desperate resistance, I think he would have been too much for you."

"That is one of those things which no one can tell anything about. It is usually difficult to decide who will be governor until after the election, you know."

"Yes, yes; but against such an overwhelming force you would not have stood any chance," the official agreed.

"It is not safe to bet on a thing of that kind," the sharp replied. "I have known four well-armed, determined men to whip fifty, right in a fair fight in the open country, and the attackers were as fierce red warriors as ever bestrode an Indian pony."

"No hired men fighting for so much a day."

with no personal interest in the quarrel—fellows who are usually ready enough to run if they think their side is getting the worst of the fight, but braves who battle like men with halts about their necks, who rush to certain death with a ringing shout of defiance, and yet, as I said, I have seen four good men stand the red devils off and in the end force them to retreat."

Mayor White looked at the speaker and knitted his shaggy brows.

There was no bravado in Talbot's manner; he did not say that he was one of the men who had taken part in the fight, and yet the official felt sure that he had been present, and that the chances were he had been the master-spirit of the four.

"Of course there is no telling how a thing of this kind would turn out, but MacGregor certainly appeared to have all the advantages on his side," the mayor remarked.

"It is but a waste of time, of course, to discuss what *might* have been," the sharp observed. "We know what has occurred, and with that we must deal."

"Yes, very true; the moment I heard of the affair I made arrangements to raise a force, and the first thing in the morning I went to the property for the purpose of calling the men who had seized the mine to an account; you know, until MacGregor made his appearance that morning no one had any idea that he was mixed up in the matter."

"I see; and I understand he satisfied you that he had a good claim on the property, so you marched your force away without attempting to take the mine from him."

"Yes; but I did not decide the thing," the official hastened to explain. "There was a committee of citizens present, and they decided he had a fair claim to the mine. Understand, Mr. Talbot, I am not trying to evade any responsibility, for, undoubtedly, if the decision had been left to me I should have decided in that way, for the proofs he presented were strong ones."

"Yes, but don't you think you ought to have given me some show in this matter?" Talbot asked.

"There is an old saying, you know, that one story is good until the other one is told."

"Very true; but you were not here; no one knew what you were or when you would return," the mayor urged.

"But I am here now, and I think the case ought to be reopened so as to give me some chance for my white alley."

"Well, I don't know," the official observed, hesitatingly.

"If his proofs were good enough to convince the town in my absence that he has a better claim to the mine than I have, then they ought to be good enough to settle the matter now that I am here."

"Yes, but it is your wife who owns the property."

"Where is she?" Talbot demanded, bluntly.

"Why, how should I know?" exclaimed White, evidently uneasy at the turn the conversation was taking.

"She is not here?"

"No, gone to Tombstone, I believe."

"Maybe she is dead," the sharp observed in the most matter-of-fact way.

"Oh, no, that is not possible!" White exclaimed.

"Have you proof to the contrary?"

"Well, I have not heard of her dying."

"Can you produce her alive?"

"Not at present, I admit, but no doubt I could if I had time to find her."

"As she has so mysteriously disappeared, I assume that she is dead, and so, as her heir, I claim the Heather Bell property."

"Oh, but I do not think that is any doubt that she is living!" White exclaimed.

"What men think is not generally received as evidence in a court, is it, mayor?" the sharp responded, shrewdly.

"Well, I presume not."

"We will have to rule it out then and come down to solid facts. I am here on the ground now and I demand a show for my money. This MacGregor claims the Heather Bell property. I say he is a liar and that he has not got a just claim to a square inch of it. That statement I am ready to make good before the citizens of this camp and I demand an opportunity to do it."

"Most certainly, Mr. Mayor, it appears to me that Mr. Talbot here is entitled to a hearing," the Englishman observed at this point, anxious to put in a good word for the sport.

White reflected for a moment.

From the way in which Talbot spoke he saw that the sharp was thoroughly in earnest and did not mean to be trifled with.

His confident tone too gave the mayor the idea that he had good backing behind him, or else he would not be so bold.

True, the thought came to him that the man might be bluffing—presenting a bold front without any cards in his hand good enough to back his game.

But the idea quickly occurred to White that he and his fellow-conspirators could not afford to risk much upon this proposition.

There was the danger that Talbot would make an appeal for a hearing to the citizens of the camp, and White knew the miners well enough to understand that they would be more than likely to think the sport was entitled to such a thing.

"Would it not be best, then, for him to grant the request, and so obtain the control and direction of the business, which if it was carried on against his opposition, would be certainly taken away from him?"

So, resolved to put the best face he could upon the matter, he said:

"I reckon you ain't far from right in this idea of yours, and I s'pose you ought to have a show. What is your idea of how the thing ought to be run?"

"Let MacGregor come forward with his proofs in the presence of the citizens of the town and give me a chance to show that he has no claim to the Heather Bell property."

"Upon my word, Talbot, I don't see how you will do it, for he has got mighty good evidence to back up his claim!" the official exclaimed, in the most candid way.

"Well, I do not know how I will do it myself until I come to the scratch and see what his evidence amounts to," Talbot rejoined, thus neatly evading White's attempt to "pump" him.

"You want this little picnic to come off tomorrow?"

"The sooner the better I should say."

"Yes, I s'pose so," and then a sudden idea occurred to White.

"I say, Talbot, you ain't planning so as to get up a street fight, are you?"

"According to what you say I should be a fool to do that," the sharp retorted.

"How so?"

"Why, what chance would I stand with what friends I could muster against MacGregor and his forty men?"

"Yes, but you would stand a heap sight better chance than you would to go and attack him in the works," the mayor remarked, shrewdly.

"I presume that is true enough, but I have no intention of bringing on a fight at present. All I want to do is to show the citizens of No Man's Camp that I have a better claim to the Heather Bell property than MacGregor; then, after that fact is understood, if he does not get out of the property and give it up to me, undoubtedly there will be a fight, and if he is not man enough to come out from his buildings and fight me in the open field, why I will attack him in his fort."

The mayor opened his eyes in amazement, astonished both by the matter and manner of the speech.

"Decidedly this fellow must have got wind in some way of what we were up to, and have come to town with a big gang at his back, or else he would never dare to let his tongue wag so freely," the mayor muttered to himself.

"Well," he said, aloud, "I will summon MacGregor to come forward with his evidence tomorrow morning; we will fix the thing at ten o'clock."

"That will suit me."

"And I will warn MacGregor, as I have warned you, that there is to be no fighting. He is to come and return in peace, and then, after that both of you can do as much fighting as you like, for I will wash my hands of the whole business."

"Luckily, as I anticipated that that might be trouble 'bout this thing, I engaged a hull squad of extra police, so I am in a condition to preserve order."

"Your police will not be necessary as far as I am concerned," Talbot remarked. "I shall not fight unless I am attacked, and then I reckon I will make it lively for the men who try the game on, if you had a hundred extra police in the camp."

"He has got a gang at his back, sure!" the official murmured, under his breath.

"At ten to-morrow?"

"At ten."

"I will be on hand."

And the interview ended.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

THE Englishman was amazed at the manner in which Talbot had conducted himself.

"By Jove, old fellow, I am really surprised!" he declared, after they had quitted the mayor's store. "You talked as confidently about upsetting this MacGregor's evidence as if you were perfectly sure you could do it! If you had a regiment at your back, prepared to espouse your quarrel, you could not have put on a bolder face."

"Well, is not that the way to do it?" Talbot asked, smiling at the amazement of his companion.

"When you get your enemy nervous, haven't you got him half whipped?"

"The general who goes into a fight, taking pains to ascertain how he is going to retreat if he gets the worst of the encounter, is not the man to win battles."

"Very true—that is my opinion exactly."

"It was my game to make this fellow think I was not at all afraid of a fight, for at present I

am not prepared for one, and I do not wish to risk an encounter until I am ready."

"If he got the idea, though, that I was not prepared, the gang would jump upon me at once."

"Yes, yes, undoubtedly."

"As it is, I have inspired the fellow with the belief that I am all ready, and MacGregor, warned by him, will undoubtedly wait for me to attack him in the mine, and so give me time to prepare."

"When I first came to this camp, a year ago, I was mixed up in a few squabbles in which I had the luck to come out the best man, and the reputation I acquired then has served me well ever since."

"The first point in the game is to show the citizens that my claim to the mine is good. I have had a good deal of experience in dealing with these miners, and as I am a pretty fair stump speaker, as stump speakers go in this Western country, I reckon I will be able to convince the crowd that Donald Maxwell was never in Black Mac's debt."

"There may be something in this paper, you know, which I can turn to my advantage after I get it into my hands."

"Yes, yes, there is a possibility of it, although I have no doubt the fellow has taken all possible precaution against such a thing."

"Certainly, that goes without saying, and the man is no common rascal either, but the smartest men when they stoop to crime sometimes make the biggest blunders."

"True again."

"And then I have a certain charge to bring against Black Mac, which he does not anticipate I fancy, and as he will not be able to refute it, the chances are great I will win the citizens to my side."

"Then the next move is to raise a force and attack MacGregor in the mine."

"If he has some forty men, as they say, I am afraid you will not be able to raise a force large enough to contend with him," the Briton remarked.

"He has only thirty men I am informed upon good authority, and some of them will be apt to desert him if I succeed in making out a strong case, and there seems to be a good prospect of my winning the fight."

"I see, I see."

"Then you must remember what Shakespeare says, 'Thrice is he armed who has his quarrel just.'"

"Yes, yes, and you have the right on your side undoubtedly."

"And I think I can make that apparent, too."

"But say, my dear fellow, you will have to begin your recruiting business right away, for at present your army consists of only one high private, myself."

"Oh, no, not so bad as that," Talbot replied. "There are four besides myself, so you see we number six men already and we have not commenced operations yet."

"Oho, I see! I comprehend, my dear fellow, you have friends in the town who have been working for you on the quiet?"

"Yes, one friend, but that one is worth a dozen of the common run of friends as they are in this life."

"A friend in need is a friend indeed!" the Briton quoted. "It is an old saying and an extremely true one."

"Yes, my recruits are summoned to meet me to-night at twelve o'clock in the rear of the hotel corral, there to receive instructions, and to-morrow each one of the four will strive to enlist more men, and my orders will be to choose good men only."

"I would rather fight my battle with five good men at my back, upon whom I know I can rely, than to take the field with fifty who would not stand by me to the last gasp."

"Your argument is sound. There's no doubt about it," the Englishman declared.

By this time the two had reached the hotel, so they halted, standing in the shadow by the side of the building, so as to observe what was going on around them without attracting particular attention to themselves.

A Chinaman, clad in the odd garb of his nation, came slowly along, looking around him as though he was a stranger.

"Hello! there's a Chinaman!" the Briton exclaimed, catching sight of the new-comer. "That is the first one I have seen down in this country. They are not common here as in California."

"No, the average man down in this district washes neither himself nor his garments," the sport rejoined. "And as about all these almond-eyed sons of the far East are in the laundry business, there isn't much show for them in this region."

The Chinaman came within a few yards of the two before he perceived them; then, when he did, he came to a sudden halt, fixed his eyes intently upon the pair, while a broad grin spread over his face, and then, without stretched hand, he came up to Talbot.

"How-d'-ye, Mistel Tlabot?" exclaimed the Celestial.

A glance of recognition came over the face of

the adventurer, and he warmly grasped the outstretched hand.

"Lee Sing, by all that is wonderful!" he cried.

"Yes, yes, washee, washee, Shasta Bal, you remember, eh?"

"Oh, you bet I do!" and Talbot gave the yellow paw of the Chinaman another shake.

"This heathen is an old friend of mine," he explained to the Englishman. "I ran across him years ago in a little mining-camp up in Northern California; Shasta Bar the town was named, and Lee Sing had a flourishing laundry establishment there."

"Yes, yes, me good washee, washee. Who washee shiltee now, eh?"

And as the Mongolian put the question, he passed his hand in a caressing way over the elaborately frilled front of Dick Talbot's shirt.

"No ilion light—botch—dam!" and he shook his head in a deprecating way.

"See here, don't you be too personal in your remarks!" Talbot exclaimed. "Since I have come into this delightful country I attend to the laundry business myself when I am away from my wife, and I don't suppose the shirt is either washed or ironed according to Hoyle, but it is the best I could do under the circumstances, if it is botched."

"Alle light now!" the Chinaman exclaimed, with a beaming smile. "Me washee, washee fol you."

"Good as wheat!" the sport cried. "I am glad you have come to town!"

"My old pard here, Lee Sing, is a chief when it comes to the laundry business."

"Yes, yes, I see, but it is hard work for me to understand what he says," the Briton remarked. "What does he mean when he says that he is going to washee, washee fol you? What on earth is fol?"

"For—he will wash for me. These Orientals have great difficulty in twisting their tongues around the letter r, and always change it into l."

"Ah, yes, yes."

"Catchee muchee dollee top side hill?" the Chinaman asked, gazing curiously around him.

"Oh, yes, this is an extremely lively camp," Talbot replied. "You can catch a good many dollars on the top side of this hill, but it is not much of a place for your business. It is a rough crowd in this camp, and they don't go much on washing."

"I have been in the camp a year now, and during that time I reckon about half a dozen Chinamen have hung out their shingles, but not one of them succeeded in making a paying thing out of it."

"Not muchee washee, washee, eh?"

"Not much!"

"Mebbee catchee muchee poken?" the Celestial suggested, with a grin.

"Aha! I forgot that you were a chief in that line!" the sport exclaimed.

"Well, John, I guess you will be able to pull through. If you cannot catch much washing, you can get all the poker in this camp that your heart can desire."

Then, turning to the Englishman, Talbot explained:

"My friend John, here—I call him John on general principles, although his name is Lee Sing, but on the Pacific Slope every Chinaman is John, no matter what his name is. Well, as I was about to remark, John here is about the finest poker-player that ever struck California, and when that is said, it means as good a player as the wide world can produce."

"So you see he has two strings to his bow. If the miners will not come and patronize his laundry by day, he goes out to the gaming saloons and skins them at poker at night."

"Alle samee 'Melican man—you savvy?" said the Oriental.

"To savvy means to understand," the sport explained.

"Yes, yes, I see; quite a character, this friend of yours," the Englishman remarked.

"Yes; he is no common Chinaman, but differs greatly from the men of his race usually to be found in this country, for John here can not only wash and play poker, but he can fight as well."

"As a rule, your Chinaman is no fighter, but my old pard is; he is as cunning as a fox, and when he is put to it can fight like a tiger."

"Me lun when me can," observed the Celestial, with a grin.

"You are just the man I wanted to see, for I need all the friends now that I can muster," the sharp remarked.

And then he proceeded to explain the situation to the Chinaman.

Lee Sing was quite willing to enlist for the war, and after being directed to come to the meeting that evening, ambled away in search of a shop for his "washee-washee" establishment.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE EXAMINATION.

THE news of Dick Talbot's arrival in the camp spread with amazing rapidity, and as it was the custom for the miners in all the outlying districts to come to the center after night-

fall to procure supplies and hear the talk of the day, the fact that Talbot was in the camp was known before midnight to almost everybody living within twenty miles of the town.

That the sharp had returned for the express purpose of making a fight for the Heather Bell property no one doubted.

All of Dick Talbot's actions since he had been a resident of No Man's Camp plainly showed that he was not the kind of man to tamely submit to an outrage of this kind.

He had come back to fight, and it was the opinion of the citizens that there was a good prospect for a red-hot time ahead.

The intelligence that an examination into the case was to be held on the following morning excited the greatest interest, and few men were there in the town who did not decide that it was extremely important that they should be present at the examination.

Mayor White in person conveyed the news to Black Mac, and Bulldog Bill went with him.

The ex-marshal reflected over the matter for a few minutes and then expressed the opinion that it was Dick Talbot's plan to get up a fight.

In some way he had heard that the mine had been seized before reaching the camp, and had evidently come prepared for war.

Bulldog Bill was of this opinion also, and to his mind a fight would be just the thing.

"You have got to wipe that galoot out some time," he argued, "and you might as well do it first as last."

To this the mayor immediately objected.

"If Talbot wants a fight, it will be because he is thoroughly prepared for one," he said. "And I do not think it is good policy to let him run the thing just as he wants it. But I reckon you ain't right 'bout it, and if you are, it is my belief that thar should not be a fight without all the advantages being on our side."

"That is my opinion," Black Mac remarked.

"The chances for my whipping him are much better if I can get him to go for me here, where my men can have the protection of the buildings rather than encounter him in the open air."

"Oh, go for him the first chance you git!" Bulldog Bill cried.

The others overruled this, though much to the disgust of the saloon-keeper, who declared that if he was Black Mac he would try to lay Talbot out the moment he could get at him.

But the mayor exclaimed that when a man secured advantages in a fight of this kind he would be a donkey to throw them away.

"This hyer sharp has kinder got an idee that he kin upset your proofs," White said, in conclusion.

"It cannot be done!" Black Mac exclaimed, decidedly.

"The bill of sale I hold is in Donald Maxwell's handwriting—bears his signature, and as that is well known to a dozen men in the camp, who can easily identify it, it will not be possible for him to upset the paper."

"And if he makes a failure in the attempt it will strengthen you decidedly," the mayor argued.

"Wal, if I war running the thing I wouldn't bother with no papers!" the owner of the Little Brown Jug Saloon declared. "I would jest go for the man and lay him out in short order."

The others dissented from this and the conference came to an end.

After his return to the camp White bustled around making preparations for the morrow; Sandy Jones, the marshal, by his order, getting all the extra men he could to serve on the police.

The eventful morning came and the citizens began to gather in the camp, coming in from all quarters, and although it was widely known that the examination would not take place until ten o'clock, yet there was a good-sized crowd in the town as early as seven.

It was a big day for the saloons, for on account of the rush all of them did a "land-office" business.

Public opinion was widely divided, but the majority of the citizens "reckoned" that Black Mac had the best of the bargain, and that it would be difficult for Talbot to do anything against him.

This opinion was industriously promulgated by the few men whom the ex-marshal had dispatched to the camp.

Black Mac did not dare to allow many men to leave the works. A wily trickster himself he was suspicious of all men, and the thought had come to him that this demand for a public trial might be only a scheme to get him and a large part of his force to leave the mine, and then the property would be open to a sudden attack.

If the sharp had any such intention as this, Black Mac resolved to baffle it by leaving a strong force to guard the mine.

As there was such a crowd, all eager to behold the trial, that no one building in the camp would begin to hold them, Mayor White decided to hold the examination in the open air as he knew that if he arranged the matter so that only a part of the crowd could be present at the proceedings it would surely raise a riot.

So he had preparations made to hold the ex-

amination in the open space in front of his store.

The police force, with revolvers flourished in their hands, were drawn up in front of the building under command of Sandy Jones, and when the hour for the examination drew near, the police formed a half-circle in front of the building inclosing a space about twenty feet across.

Near the center of this a chair and table were placed for the accommodation of the judge, and in advance of the table, but to the right and left of it, two chairs were set; these designed for the contending parties.

Promptly to the moment, the instant it was ten o'clock, Dick Talbot appeared.

The mayor caught sight of him as he advanced and called out:

"Let Mr. Dick Talbot pass through the line, marshal."

The crowd were gathered thickly around the half-circle, kept from intruding upon the reserved space by the line of armed police.

"Take a seat, Mr. Talbot," said the judge, waving the sport to the chair on his right hand.

Five minutes later Black Mac appeared.

He was accompanied by a body-guard of five men while Talbot had apparently been alone, but the sport's "army" were posted in conspicuous places in the circle of spectators.

"Right this way, Mr. MacGregor!" exclaimed the mayor. "Hyers a chair for you," and he waved his hand to the one on the right.

Black Mac entered the open space and seated himself in the chair, his men remaining without.

"Now, then, I reckon we are ready for business," White remarked with a questioning glance at the opponents.

"I am all ready," Talbot remarked.

"So am I," added the ex-marshal.

"Wa-al, gentlemen, I reckon then we will git right at it," the mayor observed.

"Fellow-citizens!" he exclaimed, rising, and addressing the crowd. "I have got a few remarks to make. I understand that it has been allowed by a good many when they heard of this picnic that they reckon it would break up in a fight, but I want you to understand that no sich kind of game is going to be played."

"This hyer camp is growing too old and too big for anything of that sort, and I want it understood that as long as I am mayor I am going to have jest as good order kept in my court, when I get one running, as is kept in any court in the country, bar none!"

At this point the crowd applauded, and a hoarse voice cried:

"Bully for you, old man!"

"These two gents, Mister Dick Talbot and Mister R. MacGregor, have had the misfortune to git into a dispute over this Heather Bell mine, and as both cannot own and run the property, it follows that one man has got to quit."

"The question has been submitted to me as mayor of the town. I passed on it before, but that was in Mister Dick Talbot's absence."

"He reckons that he is entitled to a show for his money, and I am just the kind of a man to give it to him."

At this there was more applause.

"It has allers been my boast since I have been running No Man's Camp, that everybody has had a square deal when I had anything to do with the running of the game, and I ain't a-going back of my record in this case!"

More applause and the mayor bowed.

"But as thar has been a great deal of loud talk 'bout this affair and I was afeard that some hot-headed men might take it into their heads to make trouble, I prepared for it."

"As you see, Sandy Jones, our marshal, has got a lot of extra men sworn in as police; they are all armed and their instructions are to use their weapons if the occasion arise; so, if anybody gits the idee into their noddle that they kin run the thing better than I can, they had better think twice before they chip into the game, 'cos I mean business, every time!"

Then the mayor turned his attention to Talbot.

"Now, Mister Dick Talbot, you gave me your word that you wouldn't kick up any fuss, and that after I make my decision, Mister MacGregor hyer will be free to return to the mine without any interference on your part, no matter how I decide?"

"Yes, sir, that is correct, and I intend to live up to my agreement," the sport replied.

"And, Mister MacGregor, you gave me a similar promise. Mr. Talbot was to be free to go away from this place without let or hindrance on your part?"

"Yes, sir, I will not lift a finger to molest him, nor will any friend of mine."

"You hear fellow-citizens, it is to be peace all the way through."

Then, addressing his attention to the opponents again, he said:

"Now, gentlemen, I know you mean to keep your words, but for fear that your angry passions might rise, I will put a pair of cocked barkers on the table." Then, suiting the action

to the word, he drew a brace of revolvers, raised the hammers, and placed them on the table.

"There, gents, I shall feel in honor bound to give the contents of these pop-guns to the first man that forgets the dignity of this hyer court."

"Now we are ready for business; let her sliver!"

And the mayor sat down.

CHAPTER XXIX.

UNEXPECTED EVIDENCE.

As soon as White took his seat Talbot got on his feet.

"Mr. Mayor, all I want in this matter is justice; nothing more, nothing less."

"You can bet your bottom dollar that that is exactly what you are going to get!" White exclaimed. "That is, if I have any say in the case, and I reckon I intend to have a particularly big spoon in this soup."

"I am satisfied to trust my case in your hands, for you, of course, are but the mouth-piece of the citizens of this camp," Talbot remarked, thus in a quiet way reminding the official that he wielded no despotic power, but was merely the representative of the people.

White was shrewd to see this, and though he was nettled at the blunt declaration, yet he was too wise to assume that he had any powers beyond what the citizens had conferred on him.

"The property known as the Heather Bell Mine was in my possession and there was no dispute in regard to the ownership when business called me out of town. Taking advantage of my absence this man, Roderick MacGregor, otherwise known as Black Mac, raised a force and seized the property without having a shadow of a claim to the same."

"Now, Mr. Mayor, I want to point out to you, as well as to the rest of the citizens of the town, that if any such lawless act as this is to be encouraged no man will be safe in the possession of his property."

"If the strong hand is to rule, then the biggest scoundrel will be the best man in this section and the richest, too," the sport added, as a clincher.

"That is your case, as I understand it," the mayor remarked, as Talbot paused.

"Yes, sir; that is about the size of it."

And the sport resumed his seat.

MacGregor arose.

"I have once already proved to the satisfaction of yourself, Mr. Mayor, and a committee of the citizens of this camp that I have a good claim to the Heather Bell property," he said. "But as Mr. Talbot was not present on that occasion I have no objection to going over the ground again, for I am sure that the justice of my claim to the property cannot be disputed by any fair-minded man after he understands the rights of the matter."

"I am like Mr. Talbot. I am after justice, and nothing else."

"That is what you are going to get in this hyer court, and you would be safe in betting a pile of wealth on it as big as a haystack!" the mayor declared.

"Mr. Talbot's statement that I seized the mine in his absence by the aid of an armed force is true enough, but I was not aware when I made the break that he was out of town."

The citizens looked at each other when this statement was made, and it was plain from the expression upon their faces that they were not inclined to believe it.

Black Mac was quick to perceive that he had only weakened his case by this declaration, and so he hastened on in his story.

"You know how it is, fellow-citizens, down in this country. We haven't any regular courts here to try cases of this kind, and a man can hardly be blamed for trying to get what belongs to him by force, if he cannot get it any other way."

Quite a number of the bystanders nodded heads sagely, as much as to say that this doctrine was sound enough, and the mayor took occasion to remark:

"Wa-al, thar has been a few cases of that kind since I have been mayor of the camp, and when the things was so mixed up that it would bother a Philadelphia lawyer to straighten it out I have advised the parties to fight it out."

"I trust, mayor, that I will be able to show you in this case that there is not a shadow of doubt in regard to my having the best claim to the mine," Black Mac remarked.

"Go ahead! that is what we are hyer for," White exclaimed.

"I base my claim to the Heather Bell property on the fact that I have a bill of sale of it from Donald Maxwell, the former owner, and the man who really developed the claim."

"That's as true as gospel," Mayor White ejaculated at this point. "I am a competent witness on that point, for it was a man about my size who sold the property to Donald Maxwell, and now that he is dead and gone I hain't any objections to say that when I sold the mine to him I thought he was stuck in the worst kind of way. He was a tenderfoot and I follered the Scriptures and 'took the stranger in.' Max-

well had a run of fool luck though, and struck pay dirt almost as soon as he got to work; so the lead instead of petering out as I reckoned it would, increased in richness from day to day."

"Donald Maxwell owed me twenty thousand dollars," Black Mac continued, "and the very day before the one which he met his death at the hands of some unknown assailant, he came to me and said he felt as if he ought to make me safe in regard to the money, for I had nothing to show for it—nothing but his word, but I always regarded that as good enough for I knew he was a square man."

"He was not satisfied though to let it go in that way and insisted upon giving me a bill of sale, so that I would be all right if anything happened to him."

"Yes, yes, mighty queer thing now, wasn't it?" White exclaimed in a tone of profound wonder. "Jest as if he had a presentiment that something was a-going to happen to him. If it don't beat all how strange these hyer presentiments are, sometimes," and the mayor shook his head as though he was deeply amazed at the circumstance.

"And that was the way the bill of sale happened to be drawn out," Black Mac continued.

"Maxwell was anxious to keep the matter quiet and asked me not to say anything, as he did not want it known around town that he was in the hole for any such sum."

"Excuse my interrupting you!" exclaimed Talbot at this point, rising to his feet, "but how comes it that you lent Maxwell such a large amount of money, and why did you wait so long, if you possessed this bill of sale, before putting in your claim to the mine?"

Murmurs of "Yes, yes, that's the p'int," and similar exclamations came from the lips of the crowd.

"Well, if this here was a regular court I reckon such questions as that would not be allowed," the ex-marshal responded. "I am not much of a lawyer, but that is my idea. Here is the bill of sale," and Black Mac produced the document. "Regularly drawn out and duly witnessed. Now I reckon I ain't obliged to tell why I waited so long before taking any action in the matter, and the lending of the money is a bit of private business which I am not obliged to go into."

"But, fellow-citizens, in order to show you that everything is all straight, I am going to explain."

The bystanders bent forward eagerly to listen.

"Donald Maxwell and myself had been playing poker together, off and on, for about a year, and as he was not a lucky man, while I was, he lost twenty thousand dollars to me before he was satisfied to quit."

A hum of amazement rose on the air.

The men of No Man's Camp were used to high play, but no such game as this had they ever heard of before.

"I know it seems like a big sum for a man to win," the ex-marshal remarked, "but you must bear in mind, fellow-citizens, that it represents a year's winning, and when twenty thousand dollars is divided by forty or fifty, the amount is not a big one."

This argument was sound, and the crowd nodded their heads in approval.

"Now in regard to my holding the document back," continued MacGregor. "Not anticipating that I would have any immediate use of it, I sent the paper to my lawyer at Tombstone for safe-keeping. He had business in the East and started away just after the document reached him; he only returned last week, and until he came home I could not get the bill of sale."

"This explanation seems to be reasonable," Mister Talbot, the mayor remarked, with a self-satisfied nod.

"Yes, it is all right with the exception of the twenty-thousand poker yarn," the sport replied.

"That is a big sum of money for a man to lose, even in a year, and Donald Maxwell did not have the reputation of being much of a gambler."

"No, he was a man who played on the quiet only," Black Mac replied. "But whether the story be big or little, here is the bill of sale for twenty thousand dollars with his signature attached, and as there are plenty of men in the town who are familiar with his handwriting, it can be quickly decided whether that is all right or not."

"Give me the document!" the mayor exclaimed. "I reckon I could swear to Donald Maxwell's fist anywhere."

Black Mac handed the paper to him.

The mayor unfolded it, and immediately cried with a flourish:

"That is his signature and no mistake!"

"And there are the names of two witnesses attached who saw Donald Maxwell sign the paper, without knowing, though, what it was, for, as I said, Maxwell wanted to keep the matter quiet."

"Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy!" said the mayor.

The two men who answered to these names stepped forward.

A couple of worthless roughs were they; two

bigger rascals could not have been found in the town.

"Do you remember this leetle circumstance?" White asked.

The ruffians responded in the affirmative, and Leadville Mat, acting asspokesman, related how Donald Maxwell had called them into the mayor's office and asked them to witness his signature to an important document which he was about to deliver to "Mister MacGregor."

"Can I have a look at that document?" Talbot asked.

"You don't mean to try any gum game?" the mayor inquired, suspiciously.

"Nary time! I will not injure it in the least!"

White handed the document to the sport, decidedly unwillingly, though, for he felt as if no good would come of the matter.

"It is dated May 7th, 1870," Talbot remarked.

"Yes, about a year ago; that was the time when it was executed," Black Mac observed.

Then a sudden idea occurred to Talbot.

He held the paper up so that the light shone through it, and the water-mark—as the almost invisible figures which in the process of manufacturing are stamped upon the paper—could plainly be distinguished.

"The water mark says that this paper was made in 1871—the next year after the one in which it is dated, and that plainly shows that the document is a forgery!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A BOLD CHALLENGE.

GREAT was the amazement excited by this announcement.

The water-mark was so distinct that all those in the immediate neighborhood of Talbot, who were gifted with sharp eyes, could easily perceive it.

For the moment the conspirators were struck dumb with horror; this was a surprise for which they were entirely unprepared.

Black Mac quickly recovered, though, from the effects of the unexpected blow.

"Oh, that is all nonsense!" he exclaimed.

"That mark on the paper has not anything to do with the year in which it was made," he asserted.

"Come, come, now! you know better than that when you say it!" Dick Talbot retorted.

"You, or the man who fixed the paper for you, simply made a blunder, and that is all there is to it. You are not the first smart man who has been caught in just such a trap. When the paper was drawn out—the date and the name of Donald Maxwell affixed to it, you never thought of the water-mark, for if you had, you would not have committed the blunder of dating a paper in 1870 when the water-mark plainly shows the sheet was not made until 1871."

MacGregor grew red with rage.

"Do you dare to accuse me of presenting a forged paper?" he cried, shaking his finger warningly at the sport as he spoke.

"That is exactly what I do!" Dick Talbot retorted on the instant.

"Donald Maxwell no more owed you twenty thousand dollars than he owed it to me! Your story is all a lie! You never won any such sum from Maxwell at the gaming-table; this document is a forgery, and these two witnesses, who testified that they saw Maxwell sign the paper are a pair of scoundrels who have been bribed by you to swear to this lie!"

"Wot's that?" cried Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy in a breath, reaching for their revolvers as they spoke.

"Don't you dare to pull any weapons, if you are not anxious for a quick passage to the happy hunting-grounds!" warned Talbot, both of whose hands were in the pockets of the loose sack-coat which he wore.

Apparently he was not prepared for war, but the two ruffians paused and did not attempt to get their pistols out.

Both of them were old stagers, and the game they were not up to must be a new one indeed.

They understood why Talbot had his hands in his pockets—they felt sure that a couple of cocked and loaded pistols were in his grasp and that if they did not immediately obey the warning so promptly given the chances were about a hundred to one they would be shot in their tracks long before they could get their revolvers to the level.

For a moment the idea occurred to the mayor and ex-marshal that it would be a good idea to provoke a fight, trusting that in the conflict Dick Talbot might be slain, but, as they glanced around their quick eyes detected that some of the bystanders had their revolvers out, and they immediately jumped to the conclusion that these men were partisans of the sport; if this was so, the chances were that the struggle might not end in a victory for them.

Therefore the mayor was prompt to call aloud for peace.

"Hold on, gents; none of that!" he yelled. "No weapons in this picnic, if you please. We are going to have order here if it takes a leg!"

"I don't 'low no man to call me a liar!" cried Leadville Mat, sulkily.

"Neither do I; and when that kind of thing

"happensit means blood, every time!" Bow-legged Billy declared, with a venomous look at the sport.

"Well, that is the kind of man I am, too," Dick Talbot announced. "And I say, Mr. Mayor, suppose you adjourn this court about five minutes so as to give me a chance to lay out this brace of rascals!"

And the sharp spoke as though there was not the least doubt in his mind about his ability to accomplish the feat.

"Hold your hosses, all on you!" White exclaimed. "Let us get through this business first. There will be no fighting until this court adjourns; and now we will get back to business again."

The two desperadoes retired to their former position, muttering ugly threats of what they would do to Talbot when they got the chance.

"What have you to say 'bout this hyer thing?" the mayor asked, addressing Black Mac.

White was in a quandary himself, for, under the circumstances, he knew not what course to take, but he thought that MacGregor might be able in some way to wriggle out of it.

But the ex-marshal was no more able to argue away the evidence that the sport had produced so unexpectedly than the mayor.

All that he could do was to put on a bold front.

"This water mark business is all bosh!" he cried. "It does not show when the paper was made at all. I know that Donald Maxwell gave me that document a year ago, and there isn't any mistake about it!"

"Now this is all nonsense!" Talbot replied. "Any man that has two grains of sense in his head knows that the water-mark *does* show when the paper is manufactured, and the best proof that Donald Maxwell did not sign that bill of sale is the fact that the paper which bears the signature was not made until Donald Maxwell was dead."

The mayor had been engaged during Talbot's speech in anxiously examining the faces of the bystanders, in order to discover what they thought about the matter, and, to his disgust, he saw that the current of popular opinion, which had been running in favor of Black Mac, had evidently turned, and the people at large were disposed to side with the sport.

The blunder about the paper was a fatal one.

"Well, gents, I swear, I would like to be able to decide this matter," White remarked, making a desperate attempt to appear frank and honest.

"I reckoned that thar wasn't any doubt 'bout Mister MacGregor having a clear title to the mine, but now I am really puzzled, and I don't see how I kin decide the thing, so I s'pose I shall have to leave the matter open."

"Well, it seems to me that as the only claim this man has to the Heather Bell property comes from this pretended bill of sale, and I have shown that to be a fraud, his claim is upset altogether," Talbot exclaimed.

"Yes, but I reckon I ain't lawyer enough to settle that p'int," White replied. "It is too much for me to straighten out sich a tangled matter, and, under the circumstances, I think you will have to settle the matter by a fight for the possession of the property."

"Yes, but, Mr. Mayor, considering that he is in possession of the mine, holding it with an armed force, you are giving him a decided advantage," Talbot urged.

"Wa-al, I can't help that, you know," the official replied. "I can't alter the state of things. I reckon I am acting perfectly squar' 'bout the matter. I am not going to favor either of you. As I said before, I am not lawyer enough to decide which has the best right to the place, and all I can say in the matter is for you two to wade in and settle the thing by a fight."

"I don't object to that," Talbot remarked. "And as I hate to ask any one to mix up in my quarrel, I propose that this man and myself settle the matter by a duel; if he can lay me out the property is his, and he is welcome to it."

All the bystanders listened eagerly, anxious to hear what the ex-marshal would say in reply to this bold proposal.

"Under ordinary circumstances I should, no doubt, be glad to accept an offer of this kind," Black Mac answered, "but in the present case I must decline."

"I have secured a decided advantage by gaining possession of the mine, and I should be a great idiot to give it up, so I cannot meet you in single fight, but you are at liberty to raise a force and attack me at the mine as soon as you like, and I can assure you that I will use my best endeavor to give you a warm reception."

"Aha, you are not as big a chief as you are cracked up to be, or else you would not hide yourself behind the walls of a fort!" Talbot exclaimed, contemptuously.

Black Mac's face flushed, and angry fires glared from his eyes, but by a strong effort he restrained his rage.

"I care not for your words!" he cried. "I have secured an advantage, and I do not mean

to give it up. Raise your army—come on to the attack, and then you will find whether I am a chief or not!"

"What have you done with my wife?" Talbot demanded, abruptly.

"I know nothing of her excepting that when she departed she said she was going to Tombstone," Black Mac replied. "Hasn't the mayor shown you her letter?"

"Oh, yes, but that letter is a forgery too; that is another piece of your work. My wife never wrote that note. And now I ask you again, what have you done with her?"

"I tell you I know nothing about her!"

"She is either your prisoner carried away to some secure retreat, or else you have murdered her, you villain!" cried Talbot.

"It is not the truth and you cannot prove it!" Black Mac retorted, angrily.

"Come, come, gents, don't let us have any more angry words," the mayor remarked, soothingly. "Remember that both of you gave me your words to keep the peace, and I want you to live up to your promises."

"This court decides that it cannot settle the matter. MacGregor, you git back to your mine, Talbot, h'ist into yer hotel, and after half an hour you are both at liberty to go for each other as red hot as you know how."

Black Mac turned upon his heel and strode away, followed by the five men who had accompanied him, but before he got out of the camp, three of the five deserted, only Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy sticking to him.

"I say, pard, that paper business was a bad break for you," Leadville Mat remarked with a doleful shake of the head.

It was a "bad break," for few now were there of the citizens who believed that MacGregor had any real claim to the mine.

The tide of public opinion had turned completely, and there was hardly a man to be found who was not outspoken in the belief that Talbot was entitled to the mine, with the exception of the police.

One man only gallantly maintained Black Mac's course, and this was Bulldog Bill of the Little Brown Jug ranch, and after a hot discussion with some of the crowd, the saloon-keeper marched up to the hotel on purpose to give Dick Talbot a piece of his mind.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

BULLDOG BILL was not ignorant that Dick Talbot bore a high reputation as a fighting man, but, as he had been away from the camp ever since the sport's arrival, of his own knowledge he knew nothing about him, and after he had taken a careful survey of the sharp he reached the conclusion that Talbot's prowess had been greatly exaggerated.

His reason for so thinking was that the sport to his notion did not look at all like a fighting man.

Bulldog Bill's idea of a warrior was a big, burly fellow, with a fist like a shoulder of mutton; a man something of his own stamp, and he could not bring himself to believe that this quiet, gentlemanly fellow, with his frilled shirt and dandified ways, could possibly be dangerous when on the war-path.

But he was somewhat astonished after the court had adjourned to see Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy depart with Black Mac.

His idea was that as soon as the trial ended, these two desperadoes would seek to call Dick Talbot to an account for his bold utterances.

"Darn me if it don't beat all!" he exclaimed to some of his cronies. "I allers reckoned that both Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy were galoots with plenty of sand in their craw; but now, may I be hanged if they havn't vamoosed without asking this sport to step up to the captain's office and settle."

"And he called 'em liars, too, right to their teeth!"

As it happened there were some practical jokers among the lookers-on, and perceiving the bent of the saloon-keeper's mind they thought it was fine fun to egg him on to try conclusions with Dick Talbot.

One of them remarked that it was all very well for him to wonder why neither Mat or Billy cared to "back up ag'in' Talbot," but he reckoned that if he, Bulldog Bill, stood in their shoes he would not be any more anxious to tackle the sport than the two were.

A couple more asserted that this was their opinion also in the gravest possible way, and this kind of talk spurred the burly saloon-keeper to the "interviewing" of Dick Talbot.

The jokers who had been instrumental in the matter followed Bulldog Bill, eager to see the fun.

If the saloon-keeper had not been such an obstinate, bull-headed man he might have known that Dick Talbot was a dangerous man or else two such desperadoes as Leadville Mat and Bow-legged Billy would not have hesitated for a moment in calling him to an account for the uncomplimentary manner in which he had spoken of them.

Talbot was in the saloon of the hotel when Bulldog Bill entered.

The landlord, who was a warm partisan of the sport, had insisted upon Talbot's taking a drink with him in order to celebrate the victory which he had gained, and in his exultation the landlord stood treat for all who were in the place.

After the liquor was dispatched the landlord proceeded to lay out the plan of the campaign, illustrating how the Heather Bell property might be wrested from the grip of the ex-marshal.

The entrance of the owner of the Little Brown Jug Saloon interrupted the eloquent discourse of the landlord, and those within the place only needed one look at the ugly, scowling face of Bulldog Bill to realize that he came with hostile intent.

A dead silence followed the entrance of the saloon-keeper and his followers.

Bulldog Bill halted in the center of the apartment, while his followers stopped just inside the door.

Talbot had turned to see who it was when the saloon-keeper came marching in, making a deal of unnecessary noise, so that he was face to face with the new-comer, a couple of yards only separating them.

Bulldog Bill placed his hands upon his hips, glared in the face of the sport for a moment, and then dropping his gaze to Talbot's boots, looked at him from feet to head in an extremely insulting way.

The dark and dangerous glint of fire shone in Talbot's eyes and every muscle in his powerful frame was nerved for the struggle which he anticipated was near at hand.

"Wal, you ain't sich a big galoot, arter all!" was Bulldog Bill's comment after he had finished his inspection.

"Who said I was?" Talbot inquired, in a matter-of-fact way, as this sort of thing was a common occurrence.

"Wa-al, the boys kinder took water as if they didn't keer to tackle you," the saloon-keeper replied.

"I reckon you are referring to those two liars who backed up Black Mac's claim with their false statement."

"Yes, them are the men."

"And you are astonished that after I had publically called them a pair of liars, they did not go for me after the examination was ended?"

"You are 'bout right thar, boss!" the other exclaimed. "I thought them two cusses had as much sand as any pair of men in the camp, but I reckon I was away out in that calculation."

"Oh, they had a good reason for not trying to climb me."

"How is that?" asked Bulldog Bill, puzzled by the statement.

"They tried it on once and came out at the little end of the horn, and so they are not anxious for another taste of my quality."

"I reckon that you are considerable of a blower!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed in an extremely contemptuous way.

"I reckon that you are considerable of a liar!" was Talbot's prompt reply.

The retort came so quickly and unexpectedly that for a moment it fairly took the breath of the saloon-keeper away.

He could hardly believe that his ears had not deceived him.

It could not be possible that this dandy chap would dare to call him a liar to his teeth.

"Wot is that you say?" he cried. "Do you dare to tell me that I am considerable of a liar?"

"That is exactly what I said, and the biggest kind of a brute into the bargain!" Talbot rejoined, decisively.

For a moment the impulse was strong in the mind of the burly saloon-keeper to jump at the sport and smash him to the floor, with one tremendous blow, but, he resisted the inclination, for the purpose of playing awhile with his antagonist as the cat plays with the mouse.

"I reckon you ain't never been introduced to me, or else you would know that it was mighty dangerous to shoot yer mouth off in that way when I am 'round!" he exclaimed, stretching out his muscular arms and doubling up his huge fists.

"No, and I am not anxious to make your acquaintance either. I have run across enough ruffians and vagabonds in my time without adding another to the list," the sport answered.

"Oh, I see, I shall have to smash you once or twice just to larn you to keep a civil tongue in your head!" Bulldog Bill asserted.

"Why don't you try it on?" the other asked, carelessly assuming the boxer's defensive position as he spoke, but keeping his hands well down at about the level of his waist.

"Oh, you want me to try it on, do ye, you jack-a-dandy!" and the saloon-keeper began to flourish his big fists in the air.

"Yes, try it on as soon as you like. There have been better men than you whipped in this camp!"

"Not by you, though!"

"Yes, by me."

"I never heered of it."

"Good many things in this world that you never heard of, I reckon."

"Are you ready to be smashed?"

"Oh, you will not smash me!"

"You bet I will!" cried the saloon-keeper, in the most confident manner.

"No, no; you have not learned to spell able yet."

"If you don't git skeered and run I will warm you inside of five minutes as you were never warmed afore in yer life!"

"Save your breath—you will need it all when you begin the fight," Talbot counseled.

"Look out for me! Keep yer eyes peeled, for I am a-comin'!" exclaimed Bulldog Bill, advancing slowly.

"Come on; I am ready for you."

"Oh, won't I hammer you!"

And with the word the saloon-keeper rushed at the sport, intending to batter him down with one tremendous blow, while the spectators watched the scene with almost breathless interest.

Dick Talbot, though, had met in the course of his adventurous life too many bullies of this kind not to know exactly how to take them, as the reader who has followed his fortunes since the days when he rode the brown mare as Overland Kit understands.

As the saloon-keeper rushed upon him, the skillful right arm of Talbot warded off the blow, and almost at the same moment the powerful "left" shot out, catching Bulldog Bill right between the eyes and bringing him to a standstill.

For a moment he was dazed by the force of the stroke, and then, before he could recover himself, Talbot fairly rained a shower of blows upon him, driving him back in sore bewilderment until his progress was intercepted by the wall.

He was right in front of an open window; Talbot paused in his attack for a moment, and then, with a terrific right-hander, knocked the saloon-keeper through the window.

Out he went, coming to the ground with an awful crash.

A shout went up from the men in the saloon as the conquered man disappeared.

Never, since the camp was settled, had the citizens witnessed so astounding a contest.

From first to last the saloon-keeper had no more chance with his antagonist than if he had been a stripling boy instead of a man of unusual strength.

But as he was utterly without skill and knew not how to use his strength, he was helpless to contend with his scientific antagonist, who, although he did not appear to be, was a stronger man than the saloon-keeper.

"You have knocked him out in one round!" the landlord cried. "You are a chief, and no mistake!"

"Look out for yourself Talbot!" cried one of the bystanders, who was peering through the window. "The galoot is getting up and a-pulling out his revolver! He's going for you again!"

And this announcement caused the crowd in the saloon to scatter instant.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MORE TROUBLE.

THE miners scattered when the announcement was made that the saloon-keeper was getting out his revolver.

Bulldog Bill bore the reputation of being a desperado and bloodthirsty man, and if he was not satisfied with the thrashing he had already received, but thirsted for revenge, it was plain to them that the fight would only be ended with the death or disabling of one of the antagonists.

If the saloon-keeper rushed into the apartment and opened fire on Talbot, there was a chance that some of the bystanders might suffer, for a bullet hurtling through the air is no respecter of persons, and never discriminates between the party at whom it is directed and a harmless looker-on who had no connection with the fight.

So, acting on this idea, the miners fairly fell over each other in their endeavors to get out of the way.

Talbot quietly backed to the extreme end of the apartment, drawing his revolver as he did so, and revolving the cylinder so as to be sure that it was in perfect working order.

The saloon was a long and rather narrow apartment, so that Talbot was able to put a good twenty-five feet between himself and the door.

He hadn't any idea as to whether his antagonist was a good shot or not, but even an indifferent marksman would be apt to hit his man if he was only ten or twelve feet away, and Dick Talbot did not mean to be hit.

It was only a few seconds from the time that Bulldog Bill disappeared through the window before he made his appearance in the doorway, revolver in hand.

The pounding that the saloon-keeper had received had not improved his appearance in the least, and an uglier-looking man than he, as he rushed in through the door, could not have been found in No Man's Camp.

He was almost breathless from his exertions, and it was as much as he could do to speak after he got into the saloon, halting just inside the door.

"Whar are ye?" he cried; his sight had been impaired by the terrible blows which Talbot had showered upon him, and for the moment he could not distinguish the sport.

"Here I am!" cried Talbot, "all ready for you, and I give you fair warning that if you advance a single foot I will play you for keeps!"

"You will, will you?" growled the saloon-keeper, hesitating for a moment in order to give his nerves a chance to quiet down a little, for he was fairly quivering with excitement, and he was afraid that his aim would not be accurate if he attempted to fire while in his present state.

"Yes, I give you due notice, and your blood will be upon your own head if you advance!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Oh, you can't skeer me if you are so mighty handy with your fists!" Bulldog Bill cried, endeavoring to calm himself and repress the excitement which caused him to tremble as though he had the ague.

"This ain't no fist-fight this time. I am arter blood, and I will either lay you out or you will lay me out!"

"We will fix it the latter way if it does not make any difference to you. I will lay you out. You are no benefit to the camp, anyway; your saloon is a vile den where honest men are poisoned and robbed; there's no mistake about that, and it ought to have been cleaned out long ago."

"That is a lie and I will have your heart's blood for it!" Bulldog Bill cried in a fury, and he took deliberate aim at the sport.

Perceiving that his opponent "meant business," this time, Talbot hesitated no longer, but fired, anticipating Bulldog Bill's action by a second, for the saloon-keeper's shot came so quickly after the sport's discharge that the second shot seemed like the echo of the first.

The saloon-keeper was a tolerably good marksman, but on this occasion he was in no condition to display his skill, for he was so much the victim of excitement that it was impossible for him to take aim.

He had received punishment enough to make an ordinary man take to his bed, and therefore it was no wonder that his bullet flew wide of the mark, not coming within a foot of the person of his antagonist.

The sport though fired with as much precision as though he was in a shooting-gallery, but as it happened that Bulldog Bill made a slight change in his position just as the sport discharged his revolver, Talbot's bullet did not reach the spot for which it was intended.

It had been Talbot's intention to put his ball through the fleshy part of the saloon-keeper's arm so as to disable him, but Bulldog Bill's movement sent the bullet tearing into his chest.

With the desperate courage of the brute after whom he was named, the saloon-keeper endeavored to keep upon his feet, and even tried to cock his revolver for another shot, but the wound which he had received was too much for him; with a grunt of pain the pistol dropped from his hand and he sunk to the floor.

Bulldog Bill was hard hit.

As it happened, the doctor of the camp, an Irishman, Reddy O'Donohue, was in the saloon, one of the interested spectators of the fight, and when Bulldog Bill sunk down all in a heap on the floor he sprung forward to his assistance.

Luckily the O'Donohue had not been drinking very freely, so he was in a condition to attend to the wounded man.

"Be after getting me a sponge and a little water, landlord dear, for it is meself that's thinking Bulldog Bill has got a pill which be after giving him a d'ale of trouble!" the doctor cried.

O'Donohue knelt by the side of the prostrate man and proceeded to make an examination.

He opened the shirt which covered the brawny breast of Bulldog Bill, and shook his head when he discovered there was very little blood coming from the wound.

"That is a bad sign," he muttered.

The landlord had hunted up a sponge and a basin of water and now came forward with the articles.

"I will not be after needing them, I think," the doctor said.

"How do yees feel, Bill?"

"As if a red-hot iron had been stuck into me," the saloon-keeper replied with a groan, drawn from him by the intense pain of his wound.

"It hurts you thin?"

"Yes, I never felt anything like it in all my life, but I will kill this sport before I get through with him, cuss him!" Bulldog Bill muttered.

He had grown weak so that it was as much as he could do to speak, but his desire for vengeance upon the man who had conquered him was as strong as ever.

"Don't be after worrying yourself about

that," O'Donohue remarked. "Don't give way to your timper jist now, for unless I have made a big mistake it will be some time before you will be in a condition to do any fighting."

"Mebbe I have got my ticket for soup," muttered the wounded man, growing more and more feeble; "but I am going to fight ag'in' it all I kin. I am not willing to die until I have another charge at this cuss'd sport."

"Oh, this pain is awful! Doctor, can't you give me something for to stop it? I—I—"

And then the voice of the saloon-keeper failed him and he sunk into insensibility.

"The quicker we are after getting him home, the better it will be for him," the doctor remarked. "I am afraid he is a gone case, anyway."

Talbot had advanced with the rest of the bystanders and formed one of the group around the stricken man.

"Gentlemen," the sport said, "I want you all to bear witness that this quarrel was forced upon me and that I acted strictly in self-defense."

"Oh, yes, yes; thar ain't no doubt 'bout that!" the landlord asserted, and the others said they would be willing to give their evidence to the same effect.

"But although the fight was forced on me in such a way that it was not possible for me to avoid it, yet I did not intend to kill the fellow. My idea was to disable him, but he changed his position just as I discharged my weapon, and the result was that he got the bullet in the chest when I had aimed to strike him in the arm."

"Oh, well, such leetle accidents as that will happen," the landlord observed, in a philosophical way.

"Bill came rushing in here hungr' for blood, and he ain't got no right to complain if the game went ag'in' him."

"You are all right! It was a fair, square fight, and you didn't take any advantage of him, but giv' him a fair deal right from the word go," the landlord added.

"Gentlemen, is there a shutter convenient?" O'Donohue asked. "This man must be put to bed as soon as possible; it is a mighty narrow squeeze he will have of it for his life, and I would be willing to give big odds that he will not be after pulling through; still he may, for he has the constitution of a horse and may survive a wound that would be certain to finish an ordinary man."

There were no shutters handy, but a cot-bed with a blanket folded upon it proved an effective substitute, and upon this Bulldog Bill was conveyed to his saloon.

The news of the encounter spread like wildfire, and the result was that some twenty minutes after the wounded man was carried out of the hotel, Mayor White, accompanied by the marshal, Sandy Jones, and ten police, with drawn revolvers, made a sudden descent upon the building.

Talbot, who was in conversation with the landlord, was taken completely by surprise, and before he had a chance to draw a weapon was surrounded by the police and menaced by their leveled revolvers.

"Throw up your hands, Talbot, and surrender!" cried White.

"We have got the deadwood on you this time, and it is not of any use for you to attempt to resist."

The surprise was complete.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ARREST.

EVERYBODY in the saloon stared, for this unexpected movement filled all of them with astonishment.

The mayor's words were true enough though. The attack had been made so suddenly and so utterly without warning, that not a soul in the place had an opportunity to draw a weapon, before they were at the mercy of the police.

"Hello, hello, what does this mean?" Talbot cried, looking with undaunted eyes into the muzzles of the leveled revolvers.

"It means that you are a prisoner, Dick Talbot, and that if you attempt to offer any resistance you will be shot down on the spot!" the mayor cried.

"We have taken your measure and we don't mean to give you any chance to lay any of us out," White continued, flourishing his revolver in a decidedly hostile way.

"Oh, I understand that I am arrested, I am not so dumb as not to comprehend that," Talbot remarked. "But what I want to know is, why am I arrested?"

"For murder, of course."

All within the room listened attentively.

"For murder?"

"Yes, for the killing of Bulldog Bill."

"Is the man dead then?" Talbot asked, not much astonished at the circumstance, for he had seen too many wounded men in the course of his career of adventure not to be aware that the saloon-keeper was badly hurt, and it had been his impression that Bulldog Bill would not recover; in fact, he did not think that the man would live over an hour or so.

Still there was a chance that his judgment

was not correct, for, as the doctor had remarked, the saloon-keeper was an unusually strong man with a powerful constitution.

"Yes, sir, he is dead—died before he reached his place and you are the man that killed him!" the mayor declared.

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt about that," Talbot remarked. "It isn't of any use for me to attempt to deny that I was the fellow who shot him, but I am no murderer for all that. The man came to his death in a fair fight and the difficulty too was one of his own seeking. I acted entirely in self-defense, as I can prove by a dozen witnesses, right now in this room, who saw the whole affair from beginning to end."

"Yes, that is so!" the landlord hastened to declare. "That is true, every word of it."

And a number of the bystanders added their testimony at this point.

"It war as squar' a fight as I ever see'd," the landlord asserted.

"Bulldog Bill come in hyer jest a-spiling for a fuss, and he got it too, for Mister Talbot hyer wouldn't take no lip from him, and when Bulldog Bill sailed in to warm him, he jest got hammered for all he was worth. Why, White, Mister Talbot hyer knocked him out in one round and wound up by letting him have a pile-driver which took Bill through the window fair as if he had been shot. Then Bulldog came tearing in, pistol in hand, jest hungry for blood."

"Talbot advised him to keep off, but he wouldn't, and as a result he got laid out. That is the truth now and you kin take yer oath onto it."

Again the bystanders corroborated the landlord's statement.

"Wa-al, fellow-citizens, of course I don't know anything 'bout the rights of the case and I don't pretend to," the mayor admitted.

"Bulldog Bill is dead, and a gang of his friends came rushing to me crying out that Buck Talbot had murdered him and calling upon me as mayor of the town to arrest the assassin."

"So I got my force together and hyer I am, as you see."

"It warn't murder, but the fairest and squarest kind of a fight!" the landlord protested, and again the bystanders backed him up.

"I don't doubt that it is jest as you say!" White declared. "But under the circumstances, seeing as how the accusation has been made, I will have to lock Talbot up in the calaboose until I can git time to arrange a trial," he added.

"I will see that Mister Talbot is taken the best of care of, and, of course, thar ain't no doubt that he kin clear himself without the least bit of difficulty."

"I have got to do this, you know, in order to satisfy this crowd of Bulldog Bill's friends. They are a rough gang, and if I didn't put Talbot under arrest they would swear that I was favoring him, and the chances are that thar would be the biggest kind of a fuss. I ain't taking no sides in this matter, you bet!"

"Talbot will have a squar' trial, and if he is acquitted, as he is sure to be when the real facts come out, nobody kin git back at me," the mayor added.

The explanation seemed reasonable, and yet the sharp had an idea that there was some deep game back of it.

But, under the circumstances, he saw no course open to him but to submit to the arrest, for if he attempted to resist it would give White an excuse for an attack on him.

"All right, sir, I am agreeable," Talbot remarked, pleasantly, making a virtue of necessity.

It was his game now, he thought, to hoodwink the mayor by making White believe he put implicit faith in his statement.

"Here are my weapons."

But as he made a movement to draw them, the mayor stopped him.

"Hold on, don't touch 'em! Sandy, you disarm him."

The mayor, in the old time, had occasion, by personal experience, to learn how quick with his tools was the sport, and he did not dare to allow him to handle them, for he was afraid that if Talbot got his weapons in his hands he might make a fight, and although the advantages seemed to be all on the side of the intruders, White did not dare to risk a conflict.

"All right, no objection in the world," the sport replied.

So the marshal relieved the sport of his arms, and not until they were all in the hands of the chief of the police force did the mayor breathe freely.

Now then, we will take up the line of march for the calaboose," the mayor remarked, after the disarming ceremony was over.

"Don't you be afeard 'bout yer treatment, Mister Talbot," the official continued. "I will see that you are taken care of in a first-class manner."

"Oh, that is all right," Talbot observed. "I am not at all alarmed about that. Yellow Jim Richmond of the calaboose is renowned for taking good care of his guests."

The procession started; Mayor White in the

advance, then Talbot, surrounded by the police, with Sandy Jones, the marshal, by his side, all with drawn revolvers, for although the sport had given up his weapons and surrendered, yet the attackers had a fear that his friends might attempt to rescue him on the road to the calaboose.

As it happened, none of Talbot's men were in the saloon at the time of the arrest, but the news spread with wonderful rapidity that the police had Talbot "corraled" in the hotel, and the "army" were in readiness in the street when the captors, escorting Talbot, came forth.

They were clustered near the door amid the crowd with their revolvers cocked and thrust into the bosoms of their flannel shirts so they could be quickly drawn when the time for action came.

Talbot's men had held a brief consultation when the news that the mayor and police had arrested their leader caused them to assemble, and the result of this was that the wily Chinaman, Lee Sing, was deputed to ascertain whether their chief wanted to be rescued or not.

From the fact that Talbot had surrendered without a contest his men got the idea that it was possible he preferred that the game should be played that way.

Of course they were not aware that the attack had been conducted in such a way that their leader had had no chance to offer resistance.

So, when the police with their prisoner emerged from the hotel into the street the "almond-eyed son of the Far East" set up a shout, and rushing forward got right in the way of the procession so as to bring it to a halt.

"Oh, oh! fi' collee—t'lee shirtee, 'Melican man owee John!" yelled Lee Sing, gesticulating wildly.

"Hello, hello! what is the matter with you, you durned heathen?" cried the mayor.

"'Melican man, owe John washee, washee!" howled the Chinaman: "fi' collee, t'lee shirtee!"

"Go 'long! I never saw you before!" cried Talbot.

"No savvy washee, washee?"

"Nary time!"

"You have made some mistake—get out of the way!" exclaimed White.

"No fi' collee, t'lee shirtee?"

"Nary time! no, it is!" Talbot replied.

"Mebbe Chinaman no savvy!"

And then Lee Sing slunk back amid the crowd.

Talbot understood the meaning of this move well enough, but he did not care to bring on a fight at present, for he thought it was his game to keep quiet and see what the other party were up to.

He was glad to see though that his men were on the alert and ready for a fight.

On went the party to the calaboose, which was a strongly-constructed shanty on the outskirts of the town.

Yellow Jim Richmond, the jailer, a tall, lank, heavily-bearded fellow, having been warned that the police were bringing a guest to partake of his hospitalities was on the alert to receive the party.

"Why, Mister Talbot, if I ain't right glad to see yer!" he exclaimed when the prisoner entered the jail.

"Well, Mr. Richmond, under the circumstances I don't know as I can say the same for myself," Talbot remarked.

"On, this is a mere matter of form," the mayor declared. "You will be out to-morrow, all right, just as soon as I can git to the trial, but if I didn't put you under arrest all of Bulldog's friends would howl and sw'ar I was favoring you. Take the best of care of Mister Talbot, Jim."

"Oh, you bet I will."

Then the sport was ushered into the calaboose and the door closed on the crowd.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

MAYOR WHITE was apprehensive that Talbot might be rescued by his friends, and so he put a guard of police around the jail with the marshal, Sandy Jones, in command, and strict orders were given that no one should be allowed to hold any communication with Talbot, or even to enter the jail.

White had succeeded in trapping the sport, but he was terribly afraid that he would not be able to keep him until some plan could be devised to put him out of the way.

The moment he had Black Mac safely caged, the mayor started to convey the news to Black Mac, and on the way he encountered the Englishman, Broughton.

The Briton had been up-stairs in his room at the hotel when the trouble occurred, and knew nothing about it until it was all over.

But then when he heard the particulars of the affair, and learned that Talbot had been carried off to jail, he became very indignant, and started out at once to find the mayor for the purpose of offering bail.

The mayor was extremely polite to the stranger, and explained that under the circumstances

he could not think of admitting the prisoner to bail.

He informed the Englishman that the arrest of Talbot did not amount to anything, for the moment an examination was had he would surely be discharged, as there was no doubt that Bulldog Bill had provoked the fight, and if he had suffered, no one but himself could be blamed, for he had, after the fashion of the beast whose name he bore, rushed blindly to his fate.

"My friend, Talbot, is not in any danger then?" the Englishman inquired.

"No, sir, not in the least danger," White answered, decidedly. "The man he killed was in the wrong. He provoked the quarrel and Talbot acted purely in self-defense."

"That is the story told by all those who witnessed the fight, and, of course, when that is brought out on the trial, Mr. Talbot will be acquitted."

"The only reason why I have thought it wise to lock him up in the jail," the mayor further explained, "is because Bulldog Bill's friends are making all kinds of threats, and I was afraid they would injure Talbot and so bring on a regular war in the streets of the camp."

"Yes, yes, I see," the Englishman remarked, perfectly satisfied with the explanation.

"Bulldog Bill was the boss of a hard crowd, and thar's no telling what they might do on the spur of the moment. By to-morrow the citizens and Talbot's friends will have time to rally, and then if these roughs try any nonsense they kin be cleaned out."

Broughton departed, perfectly satisfied, and White hurried on to consult with MacGregor in regard to the best way to dispose of the game who had been so unexpectedly captured.

Talbot had not been within the limits of the calaboose a half-hour, when 'Frisco Nell made her appearance and requested to be allowed to speak with the prisoner.

Yellow Jim was summoned, and 'Frisco Nell made known to him what she wanted.

"I sw'ar I would like to oblige you, but it can't be done!" he replied.

"Can't I see Mr. Talbot?"

"I reckon you can't."

"Why not?"

"Wal, them's my orders; that's all."

"Orders from whom?"

"The boss—the mayor."

"Mayor White?"

"He's the only mayor that I know."

"Oh, but I never heard of such a thing!" the girl exclaimed, indignantly.

"Wal, 'tis kinder out of the way," the jailer admitted. "But I hain't got anything to do with that, you know."

"Did the mayor give orders that I should not be permitted to see Mr. Talbot?" 'Frisco Nell asked.

"Oh, no, bless you! it wasn't you in particular!" Yellow Jim exclaimed.

"Nobody is to be allowed to see him!"

"It is ridiculous! Why should such orders be given?"

"I sw'ar you are too much for me," the jailer responded, scratching his head in a thoughtful way.

"All I know is that them's the orders, and I have got to live up to them."

"I suppose if I see Mayor White and get a pass it will be all right?" the girl remarked.

"Sart'in! thar ain't no mistake 'bout that!"

Away then went the girl in quest of the mayor, but though she searched the town he was not to be found, nor could any one tell her where the official had gone.

White had not taken any one into his confidence in regard to his visit to the Heather Bell mine.

After the girl gave up her search, she sent out her scouts, and one of these encountered the mayor some three hours afterward, when he returned to the town.

Word was at once brought to 'Frisco Nell and she hastened to the mayor's office.

She did not succeed in getting her pass, though the mayor was extremely friendly and expressed great regret that he couldn't oblige her.

If the girl had not so thoroughly understood the man she surely would have been deceived by his specious talk.

He had made up his mind not to allow any one to see Talbot, he said, because he had been warned that there was a plot on foot, hatched by some of the friends of the dead desperado to assassinate Talbot in the jail.

"Yes, but there isn't any danger of my injuring him!" 'Frisco Nell exclaimed.

"You know very well that I was no friend of Bulldog Bill."

"Sart'in, I know that well enough."

"Well, then, as there is no danger of my doing any mischief, why cannot I see him?"

"Because when a man makes a rule of this kind, he has to make it for everybody," White explained.

"If I give you a pass, making an exception in your favor, it would be all over town inside of an hour, and then I would be jest overrun with requests for passes."

"Yes, but you are not obliged to grant them," the girl argued.

"That is true enough, but if I give you a pass and refuse the rest, I reckon I would get myself into a heap of trouble right away; don't you see?"

"No, I don't!" Frisco Nell replied, bluntly. "I am a woman, and a favor of this kind can be extended to a woman without leading all the men in town to expect that they are going to be similarly honored."

"It is no use talking, Nell, I can't do it!" the mayor exclaimed, decidedly.

"I would like to do it, furst rate, but I should only get myself into trouble if I did," he continued. "I know how it would be. Some of the gang that used to go with Bulldog Bill are trying all sorts of tricks now so as to get a chance to lay Talbot out, but I gave my word that he should have a fair trial, and I mean to live right up to it."

Finding that the mayor was firm, Frisco Nell departed.

Knowing the man so thoroughly, though, she was not deceived by his words.

It was not from any fear of the dead desperado's associates that he denied all access to the prisoner; on the contrary, it was Talbot's friends he was guarding against.

He was planning an attack upon the prisoner, helpless in the jail, and he was afraid that if he permitted Talbot's friends to see him some one of them might succeed in smuggling weapons in to him.

The girl felt sure that there was mischief afoot.

The mayor's mysterious absence from the town could only be accounted for, in Frisco Nell's opinion, by the explanation that he had gone to consult with Black Mac.

Talbot was in the toils, and the conspirators intended to strike a deadly blow at the caged lion.

But if she could not gain admittance to his presence, she could at least place a watch on the jail, and possibly in that way defeat the plans of the plotters.

With the aid of Talbot's "army" this scheme was carried out, so there were two sets of watchers.

First, the police, who acted for the mayor; second, Talbot's faithful pards.

And how was it with Dick Talbot himself, shut up in the jail?

Having nothing to do, the time began to hang heavy on his hands.

In fact, Yellow Jim, who, by reason of the importance of his charge, was forced to remain in the calaboose, admitted that it was dull work.

The jailer was an inveterate smoker, and for a time found consolation in his pipe.

He generously offered to loan the prisoner an old pipe which had been retired by reason of long service, but Talbot, not being much of a smoker, declined the offer with thanks.

"Wal, I kinder thought it might help you to pass away the time," Yellow Jim remarked.

Then an idea occurred to Talbot.

"Got a pack of cards?"

"I reckon I have—'tain't much of a pack as far as looks go," the jailer replied.

"Oh, it will do. Now have you got any money?"

Yellow Jim caught the idea at once.

"Oho! You want to skin me at poker, I reckon!"

"That is my little game, and a more agreeable method of passing away time I know not. It combines amusement, instruction and profit."

"I have heerd that you were a chief, but durn me if I don't go yer, though I reckon a couple of sawbucks is all the wealth I kin scare up."

"I had just as lief win your twenty dollars as the twenty dollars of any man I ever saw," Talbot remarked.

The cards were produced; a sadly dilapidated pack, as the jailer had said, and the game began.

The jailer was an excellent player, and knowing that he had in the sport a foeman worthy of his steel, was on his metal, and on this occasion fortune decidedly favored him in the beginning, and it was not until it was nearly midnight that Talbot succeeded in cleaning him out.

Just as the game ended, Yellow Jim admitting with a sigh that he had "gone broke," there was a disturbance outside and Sandy Jones, rapping on the door, demanded admittance.

Another prisoner had arrived, a man so much under the influence of liquor that it took two men to hold him up.

He was escorted into the inner room and allowed to drop down in a corner.

Then the police departed, the jailer locked the two prisoners in together and retired to rest in the outer room.

Talbot reclined on the rude bunk.

A half-hour passed, midnight had come and the camp became quiet.

All of a sudden the drunken man sat up.

It was Talbot's old pard, Joe Bowers!

Talbot had been expecting this greeting, for he had recognized the Bowers the moment he made his appearance, and knowing the veteran so well, was not deceived by his apparent intoxication.

Bowers was an old soaker, and the spree must be an extraordinary one which would render him so incapable of taking care of himself as to necessitate the care of the police.

So the moment the veteran made his appearance, Talbot knew that his presence in the calaboose was due to a desire to get speech with him.

"Well, Joseph, I am a little under the weather at present, but I reckon I will pull through all right," Talbot answered.

Then Bowers rose to his feet, came over to the bunk, and took a seat by Talbot's side.

"Old pard, these cusses have got it in for you," Bowers remarked.

"Yes; have you heard the particulars of the affair?"

"Oh, yes, I struck the camp 'bout nine o'clock, and, in course, the boyees ain't talking of anything else, but they all think you did jest right in laying Bulldog Bill out. The galoot was really the terror of the camp, and now he is a defunct departed, the miners ain't a mite sorry."

"As far as that goes, there's no doubt about the result, as I acted strictly in self-defense."

"And w'ot do ye think, me noble dook, of this kink that the mayor has got inter his noddle, 'bout locking you up hyer so that Bulldog Bill's friends can't get at yer?"

"Why, the idea is absurd on the face of it. The friends of a bully of this Bulldog Bill stamp are not apt to stick to him after he is once knocked out of the ring. They are usually a lot of curs, who are only brave when in a gang."

"Now you are talking solid sense!" the veteran declared. "I kinder hovered 'round town a leetle, and I didn't find any Bulldog Bill men anywhar. I even went right inter his saloon—the Little Brown Jug, you know—and the place was almost deserted, only a few old bummers hanging 'round."

"Oh, now that the man is dead his gang is settled," Talbot remarked.

"Without Bill the others don't amount to anything."

"Sure as you're born!" Bowers exclaimed.

"But, I say, the mayor is taking an awful interest in you, ain't he?"

"Yes, taking interest enough to shut me up here while he hatches out some scheme to damage me," the sport replied.

Bowers chuckled quietly for a moment.

"Say, Dick, when they pick you up for a flat, they make a big mistake, don't they?"

"Well, I generally manage to hold my own."

"You bet! Well, me royal nibs, you are right 'bout the mayor being up to a leetle game, and the joke of the thing is that I am in it."

"You are?"

"Yes, funny, ain't it? And w'ot is funnier still, is that thar's two more of yer old pards mixed up into it."

"Is that true?"

"You bet it is! Luck has been running your way, Dick, my tulip, all through this game, and when I got inter it, I went in for to find out all about the rifle."

"You know then that Black Mac has come back with an armed force and seized the Heather Bell property?"

"Oh, yes, and I have enlisted in his army too, along with two of your old pards."

"You see, Black Mac had a man out picking up warriors. I met him on my way to the camp. He had five men with him, and among the five was Dandy Jim—you remember that galoot who was allers howling out that he war the man from Red-Dog?"

"Yes, yes, I remember, a good man and as true as steel in spite of his bluster."

"And the Injun, Mud Turtle."

"The red chief!" Talbot exclaimed.

"The werry identical cuss!"

"Well, this is one of the strangest things that I ever heard of," the sport remarked. "When I got into this trouble and saw that there was a long and bitter fight ahead I immediately thought of the men who had been such good pards, and wished that I could call upon them, yourself, The man from Red-Dog, the Indian, Mud Turtle, and the Chinaman, Lee Sing. These four, with myself, would form a Cohort of Five, able to contend with a small army of ordinary men."

"Hyers three of us to the front, all hunky!" Bowers exclaimed.

"And the fourth is already here, for the John found his way into the camp to-day."

"That's a piece of luck and no mistake," the bummers remarked.

"Wa-al, to come back to my mutton: when I met this gang on the way to the camp, Black Mac's agent spotted me to once for a likely recruit, particularly when he found that I was acquainted with two of his men."

"In course I didn't let on that I knew anything 'bout No Man's Camp at all, and I got all the particulars out of him, so as to find out exactly how the land lay."

"It was a lucky chance that gave you the opportunity," Talbot commented.

"Oh, you bet it was, but such chances are happening all the time if men are only wise enuff for to grab 'em when they come along."

"Black Mac's agent, Mike McKenna his name is, took a big fancy to me and I played him for all I was worth."

"I posted the boys, you know, never to let on that they had ever heard tell on a man named Talbot."

"As it happened, McKenna hadn't said much to the boys. Thar was a fight for a mine, and they were to help the man who had got the property, so that another party would not be able to jump the claim, but no names were mentioned, and the boys, not expecting to meet any one that they knew down in this country, were not curious."

"Yes, I see, but you, knowing how things were, got at once at the rights of the matter."

"Oh, I'm the galoot w'ot kin do the trick once in a while, if I am fat and lazy, but, me noble dook, for all that, you kin bet high that thar ain't no flies on me!"

"I reckon not."

"Wa-al, now, to make a long story short—to come to the pint, me lord, these galoots knowing that when you come to trial to-morrow, you are going to slide right out of this hyer trouble, had arranged a plan to jump you to-night."

"To-night, eh?"

"Yes, early in the morning, to speak by the card, you know. 'Bout three o'clock."

"Coming the old Indian game, eh?" Talbot observed. "Going for me at a time when they feel pretty certain that there will not be any one around to interfere with their plans."

"Mighty satrap! that is the way they have figured it and no mistake!" Bowers exclaimed.

"The thing is planned mighty cunning, too, as you will say when you hear how the jig is to be worked," the veteran continued.

"Oh, as far as that goes, this Black Mac has brains enough; he is no one's fool."

"No, sir-ee! you kin bet high on that. He wasn't behind the door when brains were given out!" Bowers declared.

"I have been awful keeful to keep out of his way ever since I struck the camp, 'cos I felt sart'in that if he once put his peepers onto me all the fat would be in the fire."

"Yes, he would be apt to remember that you were a friend of mine."

"That was w'ot I thought, but the way the thing was worked I managed to keep in the background, although Black Mac was in the camp to-night."

"He was, eh?"

"Yes, in consultation with this galoot of a mayor, hatching up a nice little scheme to cook your goose."

Talbot shut his teeth firmly together for a moment and the ominous fire shone in his eyes.

"Maybe when they come to try their scheme it will not work as well as they expect," the sport remarked.

"Wal, me noble dook, they have arranged a neat trick, and if I wasn't in it, I am afeard that they might lay you out this time," Bowers replied.

"It is jest as simple as simple kin be, and these simple tricks work well, generally."

"What is the programme?"

"In the first place, at one o'clock the guard around the calaboose is to be withdrawn," the veteran explained.

"You know the mayor is right in with Black Mac in this thing?"

"Yes, I have suspected that right along."

"Oh, I am sart'in of it, although both he and MacGregor are trying to keep in the background so that they will not be suspected of having a hand in the matter. McKenna is doing all the work."

"That is a wise move, for then my friends will have no chance to get at them."

"You have hit their calculation right plumb in the bull's-eye!" Bowers declared.

"The hull thing is to be blamed on Bulldog Bill's friends."

"The mayor is to tell Sandy Jones that as the town is so quiet he reckons that thar won't be any trouble, and that thar ain't any need of keeping the boys up all night, so they kin toddle off to bed."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"At one the perlice are to depart—by three every man Jack of them will be fast in the arms of Murphy."

"Morpheus, you mean."

"Make it Murphy for this country; we don't take any stock in any foreign lingo out hyer."

"Somewhar 'round three the mayor is to come to the jail, rouse Yaller Jim and ax to be admitted."

"When the door is opened he won't come in, but stand in the open doorway and ax how the prisoner is getting along. You see, Mister Mayor couldn't sleep for fear something ain't right, and he has come to the jail to ease his mind."

"That is natural, of course."

"Oh, yes; and while he is talking to Yaller Jim, in the open doorway, mind, there will be a rush of McKenna and his men, who have stole up in the darkness."

CHAPTER XXXV.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

"DICK, my tulip, how do you find yerself?" the veteran asked, in a cautious tone, all trace of intoxication having disappeared.

"Yaller Jim is to be seized and bound, the mayor threatened with a pistol, then the gang rush into the jail—they are Bulldog Bill's friends, understand, come to give you Hail Columbia!"

"An extremely cunning plan."

"Yes; and the part I am to play is to grab you from behind when the gang rush in so that you will not be able to make a desperate resistance. They don't calculate that you have any weapons, but they are skeered that you might lay some on 'em out with your bare hands."

"Well, I undoubtedly would make a desperate fight, but against such odds I wouldn't stand much chance."

"But now, me noble dook, you will be able to upset their apple-cart!" the bummer declared.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE ATTACK.

"THE scheme is well-planned," Talbot observed, after thinking the matter over for a moment, "and most undoubtedly would be successful if you had not happened to get into the game."

"Oh, yes; I reckon it would have run all right if I had not got my spoon into the soup, but that is the way things work in this durned uncertain life of ours," the veteran observed, with the air of a philosopher.

"Man proposes and fate disposes, eh?" Talbot suggested.

"Yes, sir-ee! Now you have got it down fine!"

"How many men are to be in the attacking force?" asked Talbot.

"Six altogether, including myself and McKenna."

"And two of the six are Dandy Jim and the Indian?"

"No, neither one of them is in the game," the veteran replied.

"They do not dare to put the red-skin in for fear he would not understand what was required of him. Mad Turtle is playing his usual game of appearing to be as stupid as an owl, and when McKenna axed me if I thought he could be made to understand the game I replied that I reckoned it was a little too deep for the red-skin, so he was left out."

"It was on the cards for The-Man-from-Red-Dog to take a hand, but as soon as I got the hang of the thing I concluded that it would be better that Dandy Jim shouldn't be in, so I jest give him a word of warning and he started right in to paint the camp red."

"McKenna tried to hold him in, but The-Man-from-Red-Dog wouldn't have it, and about eleven o'clock I carried him off to bed as full as a tick."

"The Man-from-Red-Dog is playing 'possum, I suppose," the sport remarked.

"Yes, that is his little game, and at two o'clock he and the rest of your warriors will be concealed in the neighborhood of this darned old calaboose, ready to take a hand in the fun when the attack is made on you."

"Aha, 'Frisco Nell has posted you!" Talbot exclaimed, jumping at once to this conclusion.

"Yes; that little woman spotted me the moment I showed my nose in her saloon," Bowers explained.

"You see, I didn't get a chance to git in thar until 'bout eleven o'clock. I have to keep mighty shady since I struck the camp for fear some of the boys would give me away, and if McKenna discovered that I war one of the old rounders hyer, he would be apt to smell a mice, so I had to watch my chance to slide into the Golden Hairpin when I war sure that none of McKenna's or the mayor's men were 'round."

"Nell posted you then in regard to how I had started in to raise an army?"

"Yes, your fellers are kinder making her saloon their headquarters, so I got in with the hull gang."

"It war 'Frisco Nell's idee for me to propose to McKenna that I should pretend to get full so as to be locked up hyer with you, telling McKenna that I would be able to hold you when the attack war made, so you wouldn't be able to do any damage."

"And he fell into the trap?"

"Jumped in, me noble dook! Jumped into at once, that is the word! I never see'd a man take a bait so quick in all my born days!" Bowers declared.

"I do not wonder at it, for a smarter man than I take this fellow to be, would surely have been entrapped."

"Yes, he went right off to the mayor and told him what a big idee he had struck. The galoot took all the credit for it, of course, and old man White he thought it was a big scheme too, but if he had known that the man he proposed to introduce into your cell was a galoot about the size of the old, original Joe Bowers, I reckon he would not have gone into the raffle so quickly."

"Yes, but I should have thought you would have been afraid the mayor would have remembered you were a friend of mine," the sport suggested.

"Oh, I've kept out of the way—I've been dreadful shy and retiring since I struck this camp," the veteran remarked, with a grin.

"But he surely would have remembered your name, if he had heard it."

"Oh, no, I ain't traveling under my own cognomen now," Bowers replied. "Don't you be afeard 'bout that. Yer uncle is too old a bird to be caught napping. When I found that I was wanted for crooked business, I changed my name. I am Mustang Joe, all the way from Texas now."

"That was a good idea."

"Oh, yes, I am up to a trick or two if I am gitting old and lazy!"

"Well, it seems to me from the programme you have laid out that we will not have much trouble in coming out winners in this game," Talbot remarked.

"Wa-al, me noble dook, that is the way I figure it."

"When the attack is made, all we have to do is to hold the gang at bay until my party can take them in the rear."

"Yes, and won't they be astonished when that little surprise party is sprung upon them," the veteran remarked, with a prodigious grin.

"It will certainly be apt to make them open their eyes. But was it on the programme for me to be killed right in this jail here?" the sport asked.

"Oh, no, the gang are to all wear masks, you know, so as to disguise themselves, 'cos it is Bulldog Bill's friends who are running the thing."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"You were to be knocked down and bound; then carried out and hanged to the tree in front of the calaboose."

"A nice little scheme, and it really seems a pity to spoil a plan so cunningly contrived, but as I am not quite ready yet to pass in my checks, and quit the game, I shall have to play a trick upon these fellows that they will be apt to despise."

"Let me see," Talbot observed in a meditative way, "how shall I work the game? It is not enough to simply defeat the attack; what I must do is to capture two or three of the attacking party and then, through them, bring the guilt of the attempt right home to this scoundrel of a mayor."

"I am getting tired of these blows in the dark, and I would like to show the camp just what a rascal this Gideon White really is."

"There is only one man who kin bring it home to the mayor, and that is McKenna, for none of the rest know anything about it," Bowers remarked.

"I played McKenna for a flat and caught him foul, smart as he thinks he is," the bummer continued with a smile.

"He reckoned I was all wool and a yard wide, the clear white article and no mistake; jest the man to tie to, and so he let on more to me than he did to the rest, but though he said he had to see a certain party for to get orders, yet he was keeful not to say who that party was. I suspicioned that it war this galoot of a mayor, for McKenna let out that the man he had to see had a room back of his store."

"And that fits Mister Mayor exactly!" the sport declared.

"So I reckoned."

"But if we get McKenna in a tight place he will be apt to squeal," Talbot suggested.

"Oh, yes, he is jest the kind of man to try for to get out of a hole by laying the blame upon somebody else," the bummer replied.

"If he finds you have got the upper hand, and that the mayor won't be able to do anything for him, he will be mighty apt to be willing to make the best bargain he can."

"Are you well-heeled with weapons?" Talbot asked.

"Yes, I brought an extra pair of revolvers for you," Bowers replied, producing the tools as he spoke and handing them to the sharp.

"Thanks! Now we can fight a pretty big gang, but as it is my game to capture these fellows, and not to kill them, a good club would be more effective than these pistols."

"Say! didn't I see a couple of stools when I was h'isted into this hall of dazzling light?" Bowers asked.

"Yes, good substantial ones too; the very things!" Talbot exclaimed.

"With these stools for weapons, you on one side of the door and I on the other, we can lay these fellows out as fast as they come up."

"You bet we kin!" Bowers declared. "And McKenna will be likely to be the first man."

"All right, I will take him then, and you the second, I the third and so on."

"Ah, me noble dook, it is the world to a china orange that thar won't be ary so on!" the veteran asserted.

"Arter the furst two men are laid out, 'tain't likely that the rest will dare come up to the scratch."

"No, not if they understand the fate that has befallen their companions, but in the darkness, under the excitement of the moment, they may not tumble to the game we are playing."

"Oh, yes, they will, 'cos it won't be dark," Bowers remarked.

"Thar's the jailer's lantern burning in the other room; then, when they rush in, the door is to be left open, and the moon, which is out full and strong, will shine in, so thar will be

plenty of light; calculations have been made on that."

"Well, it does not matter much. We will down the first two men—bear in mind we must lay them out so they will not be apt to give us any trouble for a few minutes—then we can hold the others at bay with our revolvers until our men can come to our assistance."

"We kin work the trick as easily as rolling off a log!" Bowers declared.

"I think so myself, for we will take the attacking party entirely by surprise."

"Yes, we will gi'n 'em surprise number one, and when the gang take 'em in the rear, that will be surprise number two, and it is really a question which one will be the most surprising," and the veteran chuckled merrily as he reflected upon the matter.

"Well, as we have a couple of hours before the attack comes, we might as well make ourselves comfortable. This bunk is rather small for two—"

"What is the matter with the floor and a blanket?" Bowers asked.

"All right, if that will do you."

"You bet!"

In ten minutes both were fast asleep.

At three o'clock precisely there came a knocking on the door of the calaboose.

The prisoners awoke immediately.

The moment of the attack was at hand.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SURPRISE.

GRASPING the heavy stools, Talbot took up a position on one side of the door and Bowers on the other.

Everything was so still that, through the thin walls of the shanty, the pair could plainly hear all that passed.

Yellow Jim, the jailer, was so deep in slumber that the applicant for admission was obliged to knock a second and a third time before the jailer was roused.

Then the prisoners heard Yellow Jim get up, swearing at being disturbed, and go to the door.

To his demand to know who was there, the mayor's voice responded.

"It's me, Mayor White," the official replied, with his usual disregard for the rules of grammar.

"Let me in, I want to speak to you, Jim."

"Oh, all right," Yellow Jim replied, and the listeners could plainly detect from the way the man spoke that he was astonished at this untimely call.

Then to their ears came the noise of the jailer undoing the fastenings of the door, and the creak of the portal on its hinges.

"I won't come in, Jim," said the mayor, after the door was opened. "All I wanted to know was if the prisoner is all right."

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Yellow Jim in an astonished tone. "Why shouldn't he be?"

"Yes, he ought to be, I know, but I had some ugly dreams 'bout his escaping, and they worried me so that I couldn't help coming to see if he was all right."

"Wal, hang me if that ain't the durn'est idee I ever heered tell on!" the jailer declared.

"Yes, 'tis kinder odd, I know, and I ain't a man that usually gives way to sich things, either, but I swar them dreams seemed so real that I couldn't help coming to see if the galoot was hyer all right."

"Oh, you kin bet yer boots on it!" the jailer declared in the most positive way.

"I tell you wot it is, mayor, as long as I run this yere calaboose, when a man gits into it, he gits in to stay until I am called upon to produce him, and thar ain't no two ways 'bout it, either!"

"Wal, I am glad to hear it!" the mayor declared.

"And he is taking things quiet, eh? Ain't trying for to kick up no row?"

"No, in course not! Wot good would that do him, I would like to know?" the jailer exclaimed, in a sort of disgusted way.

"Oh, no, Mister Talbot has got too much good sense for that. He went to bed 'bout twelve o'clock, and I reckon he has been sound asleep ever since, for I ain't heered him even move."

"Wal, that's good," White commented.

"He's talking so as to give time for the gang to sneak up," Bowers whispered to the sport.

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"I'm glad he is all right; it takes a weight off my mind, and I kin git back to my bunk ag'in!" the mayor remarked.

"Oh, don't you worry 'bout him. When you give me a prisoner to hold on to, I hold on to him and don't you forget it! Yes, sir-ee, I'll hold on to him until the infernal region freezes over!"

Hardly had the boast escaped the lips of the jailer when to the ears of the listeners there came the sound of the rush of many feet.

The intruders had shoved the mayor into the jail and surrounded the jailer almost before that astonished man comprehended what had happened.

"Hello, hello! wot does this mean?" he cried, reaching for his revolver.

But the assailants, who all wore masks over their faces, had their pistols out, and Yellow Jim Richmond was immediately menaced with them.

"Don't you dare to pull a we'pon or we will lay you out stiffer'n a wedge!" the leader of the masked men cried, his voice low but deep.

"We want yer prisoner—we want this murderer, Dick Talbot, and we are going to have him! You better take it quietly or we will rip you all to pieces!"

By this time the jailer comprehended the nature of the attack, and was quick to abandon all thoughts of resisting.

"All right, boys. I ain't ready to die yet, so you needn't fool with your we'pons!" he exclaimed.

The mayor here put in a word so as to keep up the part he was playing.

"Gentlemen, you ought not to try this kind of work! This is all ag'in' the law, you know!"

"Nary time!" the leader of the gang retorted.

"We are the law, and you kin bet high onto it."

"We are judge, jury and executioner. This sport has been tried and condemned; and now we are going to put him through a course of sprouts!"

"That is McKenna—I know his voice," Bowers whispered to Talbot. "Don't he sling a nasty stump-speech?"

"Yes, but I will spoil his eloquence the moment I get a crack at his head," Talbot declared with a grim smile.

"All right, gents; since you have got the upper hand I s'pose you will have your own way," the mayor remarked.

"You bet we will, or else we'll wade in blood!"

At this point the members of the gang began to remove the fastening of the door which led to the cell.

They tore the heavy bar from its sockets and then pulled the door open.

"Whar are you, Dick Talbot? You are wanted!" the leader of the gang cried as he advanced into the room closely followed by his men.

"Here I am, judge!" cried Talbot as he brought the heavy stool down with a tremendous whack on the head of the intruder, knocking him to the floor all in a heap.

Bowers served the second man a similar trick, and then the rest started back in confusion.

The prisoners pulled out their revolvers and fired at the astonished men, throwing the muzzles of their weapons well up though, for they had no desire to kill the fellows, although they had tempted such a fate by engaging in the enterprise.

The masked men fled in wild confusion, only to be encountered at the door of the jail by Talbot's "army," who, knocking the fellows down with the butts of their revolvers, easily captured the lot.

To say that the raiders were a surprised and disgusted lot of men would be but to mildly state the facts of the case, but far more surprised and disgusted was his Honor, Gideon White, the Mayor of No Man's Camp.

The affair took so little time that it was over almost before he knew what had occurred.

The scheme had been planned so carefully that the conspirators felt sure of success.

Up to the time of the entrance of the masked men into the cell, everything had progressed exactly as it had been arranged, running like clock-work, and now, in one little minute, all was confusion.

Every man of the raiding gang was a prisoner, and it was as much as the mayor could do to keep his temper and refrain from bursting out into a string of curses when Talbot and Bowers made their appearance in the door of the cell with their revolvers displayed.

The moment that White caught sight of Bowers though, he recognized the bumner, and immediately guessed the nature of the trick which had been played, and then he cursed his own stupidity and carelessness in not having made McKenna submit his men to his inspection.

It was too late now, though; the game had been played, and his side had lost.

"Well, Mr. Mayor, we have come a little surprise party on this gang!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Yes, yes; I did what I could to stop them, but it was of no use," the official remarked.

"They had their innings, and now comes mine!" cried the sport, grimly.

"Bring a lariat, some of you, and bind those two men inside. One of them has a hangman's rope on his arm; put the noose around his neck and bring him out."

Dandy Jim, for the famous Man-from-Red-Dog was there, "as large as life and twice as natural," as he would have asserted, and the Chinaman hastened to comply with the command.

By the time that McKenna was bound and the rope adjusted around his neck his senses had returned; great was his amazement when he was confronted with Talbot and comprehended that not only he but all of his men had been captured, and were now at the mercy of the men whom he had come to slay.

But when the veteran bumner grinned in his face he understood how he had been betrayed; and when he gazed upon the men who stood guard over his followers he saw that two more of his "army" were evidently in league with the man whom he had been hired to kill.

"Take off his mask!" commanded Talbot.

It was removed.

"Aha! you are a stranger, as I thought," the sport remarked.

"Why did you wish to kill me?"

"I am a friend of Bulldog Bill!" the ruffian growled.

"You are a liar!" Talbot cried, sternly. "I don't believe you ever saw the man in your life. Who was Bulldog Bill?"

McKenna was in a trap; all that he knew about the man was that he had met his death at Talbot's hands.

"I sha'n't answer," McKenna replied, sullenly.

"Because you cannot; good reason!" commented the sport.

"Well, McKenna, you are in a tight place, for I am going to string you up to the tree outside—the tree to which you intended to hang me!"

The desperado turned pale.

"Only one chance for your life have you. Make a clean breast of it and betray the man who sent you on to kill me. You need not be afraid of his vengeance, for I have the upper hand in this town just now, and I intend to keep it!"

Great drops of sweat started forth on McKenna's brow, and he looked appealingly at the mayor.

"See hyer, Talbot, this is going too far!" White protested.

"Take charge of that man, Dandy Jim, and if he opens his mouth again cram the butt of your revolver into it!"

The big fellow marched over to the mayor.

"Now, speak, McKenna, or may Heaven have mercy on your soul!" Talbot exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CONFESSION.

McKENNA was not composed of the stuff of which heroes are made, and when he saw certain death staring him in the face, he "weakened," to use the expressive Westernism.

He suspected from Talbot's stern command to the red-headed Giant that the sport had an idea who was responsible for the attack, and as the mayor was powerless to aid him in this dire extremity, he made up his mind to make a clean breast of it and trust to the mercy of the man whose life he had attempted.

As far as he could see it was the only chance he had. In no other way could he escape the doom which was so near.

"Hold on, I will own right up!" he cried. "You have got me foul, and I might as well make the best of a bad job."

"Spoken like a sensible man!" Talbot rejoined. "And you can bet all you are worth that if the man, or men, who hired you to do this work got into a tight place, and could get out of it by throwing all the blame on you, they would do it in a moment."

"Like as not," and McKenna gave a sideways glance at the mayor.

White frowned and looked angrily at the desperado, but he did not dare to speak, for the brawny Man-from-Red-Dog was at his side, watching his charge as a cat watches a mouse, and there was an expression upon his face which to Gideon White's imagination seemed to indicate that he would only be too glad to get a chance to shove his revolver down his, White's, throat.

"Well, since you want the truth, hyer goes," the desperado began: "You are right 'bout Bulldog Bill. I don't know anything 'bout the man, never saw him in my life, and don't take any more interest in him than I do in China."

"How did you come to attack me then? Some reason for it, of course?" Talbot demanded.

"Oh, yes, mighty good reason to a man as hard up as I generally am," McKenna replied, with a grin.

"You were paid by somebody, then?"

"Now you hit me whar I live!" the man replied. "Yes, sir, I am not running this game for fun, but for ducats. I came across a man in Tombstone who allowed he had a job down in this country that would pay me mighty well if I chose to tackle it."

"I was 'way down to bed-rock at the time, and war mighty glau of the chance to pick up the ducats."

"It war the old story, you know, a fight for a mining claim, and this galoot wanted me to raise an army so he could jump the claim."

"And you did the trick?"

"You bet—to the queen's taste! But before I got all the fine raised, my boss got word that thar war a good chance for him to make the jump, and so he came on with what men I had enlisted, leaving me to pick up the rest."

"I see, and then you came."

"Yes, and the moment I struck the camp I was put onto this little job, which hain't turned out the way it ought, too."

"Well, you can not keno every time. And

now the question is, give the name of the man—your employer."

"MacGregor, otherwise called Black Mac!"

This information did not take any one by surprise, for all expected it.

"But he was not the man who arranged this scheme—this attack on me to-night!" Talbot exclaimed.

"No, you have got the head devil thar!" and the desperado pointed to the mayor.

"This is a most outrageous lie, Mister Talbot!" the official exclaimed, very pale and nervous.

"Shall I come the revolver act on him?" asked The-Man-from-Red-Dog, flourishing the weapon in his huge paw.

"Ob, no; give the man a chance to explain," was the order.

"The charge is an infamous falsehood! I never saw the man before in my life!"

"Oh, come down now!" cried the desperado in supreme contempt. "It isn't of the least use for you to try and lie out of it!"

"Didn't you come to me when we were a-hiding down the street and ax if I was all ready for the jump?"

"No, no, no such thing!" the mayor cried, all of a tremble.

"I will leave it to the gang hyer!" the man retorted, "and as you seem to have rung in some of your boyees onto me, you will believe them if you don't the rest."

"Is this the truth—did this man do as McKenna says?" Talbot asked.

"Yes, yes, sure enuff," cried the rest, in a sort of chorus.

"It is no such thing! they mistook me for some one else," cried White, frightfully agitated.

"Oh, no, you are in the hole now, and you might as well own up," McKenna remarked.

"It was his part of the game to come on ahead and get the jailer to open the door so we would have a clear field," the desperado continued.

"White, there is no doubt about this matter," Talbot remarked, in his grave, stern way. "This is the second time we have run afoul of each other, and of all things in this world I despise an enemy who tries to strike me in the back."

"An open foe I can respect, but I have no words strong enough to express my contempt for the secret enemy who does not face me and only strikes when my back is turned."

The mayor saw that it was useless to continue his denials. He was in the toils, fairly caught, and all the falsehoods in the world would not aid him, so he resolved to eat humble-pie and see if he couldn't beg off.

He threw himself upon the mercy of the man whom he had tried to kill, promised to resign his office and to leave No Man's Camp forever if he was only allowed to depart.

"But I am willing to get satisfaction on a fair stand-up fight," Talbot asserted. "I will give you a chance for your life, although you were not willing to give me any."

All present thought this offer was an extremely magnanimous one, but the mayor, from what he knew of Talbot's prowess, only regarded it as an invitation to certain death, and he was quick to decline.

He was satisfied—he had had all the fighting he wished, and now all he wanted was a chance to get out as soon as possible.

He had an opportunity to sell his store out to the old Jew who had started an opposition place across the way. He would close the bargain the first thing in the morning and depart, never to return.

"I will resign the mayorship in your favor," he said in conclusion, "and then you can go ahead and make it as warm for Black Mac as you like."

"The dog is dead for me, anyway, as far as this camp is concerned, and the quicker I get out of it the better!"

Talbot reflected upon the matter for a few moments, and then decided to accept the proposition.

The man richly deserved to be punished in some way, but the sport resolved to leave his judgment to fate.

When he made known his resolution, McKenna took courage to speak.

"Say, old man, since you are willing to let this head devil go, I hope you will not be hard on me. I ain't any better than I ought to be, I know, but when a man has starvation staring him in the face he ain't apt to be particular. You will need fighting-men in this war; give me and my pards hyer a chance, and we will fight for you as men fight with halters around their necks."

As the man argued—after permitting the chief to go free, there was no reason to hold the rank and file; so Talbot accepted the offer of their services.

By this time there was a big crowd gathered outside of the jail, for the camp had been rudely awakened from its slumbers by the sound of the pistol-shots.

White suggested that there was a good opportunity to explain to the camp that he had resigned in favor of Talbot.

The sport assented, and White made a brief speech.

He told the crowd that he was satisfied that Talbot had been justified in killing Bulldog Bill, and it gave him great pleasure to set him at liberty, and that as business was calling him away from the town, he resigned his office of mayor in favor of "Mister Dick Talbot."

This announcement was received with cheers, for the sport was popular in the camp.

Then White took Talbot one side and told him that after he settled up his affairs—and it would only take him a few hours to attend to them—he would go out to the mine and explain to Black Mac how strongly the tide had set against him.

"Mebbe he will be wise enough to give up the mine without a fight," White said, in conclusion. "I hardly think it, though, for he is just bull-headed enough to think he kin pull through."

"Very well, it will do no harm to make the trial, but one bit of information you can give if you will—where is my wife, Diantha?"

"Upon my word, Talbot, I know no more about the matter than you do!" White replied, earnestly. "I think, though, that she has started to meet you, for I do not believe that MacGregor would dare to harm her."

"It will cost him dear if he has," responded the sport, the ominous light shining in his dark eyes.

White kept his word to the letter.

By eight o'clock he had closed up his business affairs and was on his road to the Heather Bell property.

He brought little news to MacGregor, though, for the first thing in the morning Black Mac, anxious to learn how the carefully-planned scheme had succeeded, sent out his spies, and through them had been put in possession of the news.

"Then you propose to withdraw from the game?" Black Mac observed, grimly, after the ex-mayor had finished his explanation of how it was that everything had gone wrong.

"Yes; I have got all I want—I am a white man and not a hog, and I know when I have enough."

"This sport has scared you out of your wits!" the other exclaimed.

"Better lose your wits than your life," White retorted. "I tell you it is no use to attempt to fight against this fellow. He is too strong, and if you are wise you will get out of hyer as soon as you kin."

"I will hold the place while one timber remains upon another!" Black Mac cried, defiantly.

"Wa-al, I will not attempt to argue the matter with you. Play your game your own way, and I wish you luck."

Then the ex-mayor departed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HUNTED DOWN.

THAT Dick Talbot did not propose to allow the grass to grow under his feet was apparent by the fact that White had not been gone ten minutes before the investing "army" appeared.

And as the men in the works looked over the wall they perceived, to their dismay, that about all the men in the camp seemed to have turned out to fight for the sport.

Some comments of this nature reached Mac's ears.

"No, no!" he exclaimed, "he has only a few men; the rest have come to see the fun."

And then he went briskly to work to prepare to resist an attack.

But he soon perceived that there was a deal of dissatisfaction among his men, for they were gathering in little groups and discussing the situation with many an ominous head-shake.

Black Mac reflected upon this matter for a few moments, and the circumstance gave him much uneasiness.

If his followers would not stand up to the rack and bear the brunt of the battle he could not hope to resist an attack.

He resolved to have a talk with them about the matter and see just how many he could depend upon.

So, posting a couple of the men, upon whom he knew he could depend, as sentinels to prevent a surprise, he addressed the rest in a short speech.

He told them that, aided as they were by the fence and buildings of the works, they could easily hold the place against four times their force, but if any of them were dissatisfied, and felt like retreating, he hoped they would go now before the struggle began, so he could tell how many fighters he could depend upon.

To Black Mac's astonishment and anger over one-half of the men immediately stepped forward and said that if it was all the same to him they would like to be counted out.

Only ten men cared to stick and take their chances with him.

Black Mac knew that it would not help the matter any to remonstrate.

If the men did not want to fight they were better out of the mine than within the walls.

Away trooped the malcontents, to be received with a great cheer when they marched toward the invading army, holding up their hands to show that they did not come with hostile purpose.

Black Mac watched the proceeding through a convenient peep-hole in the fence, and, to his disgust, saw that after a brief conference with Talbot, these men fell in with the rest.

It was plain.

These men, afraid to remain and defend the mine, had now enrolled themselves in the ranks of the attackers.

This was something upon which MacGregor had not calculated.

"I am so much weaker and this infernal Talbot so much stronger!" he muttered.

Yet Black Mac might have been wise enough to know that such a thing was not at all improbable.

The average man likes to be on the winning side, and at present the tide was certainly setting very strongly in Talbot's favor.

"Anyhow, thanks the buildings, we can make a desperate fight, and when they attack we can make it cost them dearly!" MacGregor muttered.

But Talbot was an old hand at this sort of thing, and knew a trick worth two of an open attack.

He did not attempt an advance in force, but drew a line of men around the mine, just out of range, so that it would be impossible for any one to escape from the place.

Black Mac watched this proceeding with interest, which soon deepened into anxiety.

He had calculated upon an attack, not upon a siege, and had not laid in a store of provisions.

There was a small amount, enough to last a day, perhaps, but no more.

Then the only water that was to be got was from the creek in the rear of the mine, and some fifty feet from the fence.

When the forces were disposed, Black Mac noticed that a strong guard had been placed at this point, but at first he did not perceive the reason.

But now he did.

The rifles of this force commanded the water-hole, and it would be certain death to attempt to go to the creek.

Some of the men called Black Mac's attention to this.

"Oh, we can easily get a supply at night," he said. "The darkness will shield us."

But, when the dusk of the evening began to set in, Talbot was shrewd enough to kindle a huge bonfire in the neighborhood of the water-hole which lighted up all the adjacent ground.

The provisions were nearly out, the water was exhausted, and Black Mac saw that the game was lost; he could not hold the position against the twin enemies, hunger and thirst.

But his soul revolted against falling into the hands of Dick Talbot, and so, without saying a word to his followers, he determined to make his escape in the darkness.

He adopted the red-skin's plan of waiting until the morning hours were near, and then noiselessly stole out of the works by the rear gate.

With all an Indian's craft he wormed his way over the ground, favored by the fact that he came across a picket who was not as vigilant on his post as he might have been, succeeded in passing the line and gaining the shelter of the adjoining foot-hills.

Two hours afterward, when the daylight came, the men in the works discovered that they were minus a leader.

They held a brief consultation, and, as a result, dispatched a flag of truce to Talbot, announcing that they were ready to surrender the fort.

The moment the intelligence reached the sport that his prey had escaped he hastened to place the sleuth-hound on his track.

Mud Turtle was immediately called upon to exert his skill, and a better tracker than the brawny Blackfoot brave never set foot upon a trail.

He traced the footsteps of the fugitive with very little trouble, for Black Mac had not calculated upon having an Indian dog his trail, and so had not been as careful as he might.

The Cohort of Five alone followed the chase, for in such work as this Talbot knew that the average miner would be more of a hindrance than a help.

Straight to the lonely cabin in the mountains, where he had carried the hapless Diantha, the fugitive made his way, and to the cabin the trackers trailed him.

They were too late!

A fearful tragedy had taken place!

Black Mac lay on the cabin floor, dead, and on the rude bunk, by the wall of the apartment, was Diantha, mortally wounded.

She had strength enough to tell the story of the terrible event.

Black Mac had suddenly made his appearance, entering rudely into the cabin where the girl slept. She had not dared to remove her clothes by day or night since she had been made a prisoner. At his intrusion Diantha sprung up in alarm, for she knew by the expression upon the

features of MacGregor that he contemplated some dreadful deed.

He ordered the ruffian to saddle the horses, and when the man left, announced to the girl that he was about to carry her to a far distant point, where they would be married, saying that he had killed Dick Talbot, and was obliged to fly to escape the vengeance of his friends.

In her frantic desperation Diantha was ready to do anything to escape from so dreadful a fate.

One of Black Mac's revolvers projected from its holster. This the girl suddenly snatched. Black Mac grappled with her and the weapon was discharged, wounding MacGregor mortally, although it was not apparent at the time, for he kept up the struggle. Then the revolver was fired again, and this time Diantha's breast received the ball.

She released her grasp on the pistol, tottered back and fell upon the bunk.

Black Mac looked at her for a moment and then fell backward, dead.

Talbot bent over his lost love, the hot tears streaming freely from the eyes of the strong man.

She wound her arms around his neck, pressed her cold lips to his and her soul fled to the better world beyond the stars.

Our tale is almost told.

The death of MacGregor ended the contest for the mine, and Talbot came again into peaceable possession of the property; but, as he confided to his trusty cohort, there was a cloud upon the place since the death of the woman who brought it to him.

He resigned the mayorship of the town, as he said he did not intend to remain in the camp, so Sandy Jones was elected mayor and "Yaller" Jim Richmond was promoted to the marshalship.

The Briton at last solved the riddle concerning 'Frisco Nell.

In a conversation with her one day the name of Curly Bill was mentioned, and the girl admitted that Peters had been her husband.

And then, trembling with excitement, Broughton told his story, but he was not acting for a brother, but for himself.

He was the man who deserted the California wife; 'Frisco Nell was his daughter.

But the girl was not disposed to forgive the wrong which had been done her mother, and she said frankly she did not think she would ever learn to love him as a father should be loved.

"But you come of a noble family, girl. In England I bear a title!" the Briton urged.

"I don't care! I am paddling my own canoe here, and here I will remain. I wouldn't go to England to live if you gave me the whole country. I am a child of the Wild West, and here I will stay!"

When the Briton confided the result of this interview to the German, the professor laid his finger upon the side of his nose.

"Ach! cannot you see? eef you take Talbot mit you to England, dot gal would swim across!"

But, if this was the truth, she made no sign. What the future will bring forth time alone can tell.

Speak to Talbot of love and of a woman, and the sport's reply is bitter:

"I seem to bring bad luck to all women who love me; therefore, henceforth I think I will turn woman-hater, not for my sake, but for theirs."

THE END.

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